the weekly
Standard

APRIL 5 / APRIL 12, 2010

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OBAMA VS. ISRAEL
ELLIOTT ABRAMS

REPEAL

The Overthrow of Obamacare

BY YUVAL LEVIN

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THE OBAMA HEALTH PLAN TEARS UP YOUR CONSTITUTIONAL RIGHTS

Dear Patriots, The enactment of the Obama health law is a bruising blow to American freedom and medical excellence. But the war is not over. There can be no negotiation between freedom and coercion.

The Obama health law forces you to buy a one-size-fits-all health plan, whether you want it and can afford it or not, and expands the powers of the IRS to punish you for noncompliance. This violates your rights. Nothing in the U.S. Constitution permits this coercion. In fact, the 28 beautiful words of the Tenth Amendment prohibit it.

For the first time in history, the Obama health law empowers the federal government to dictate how doctors treat privately insured patients. That means the federal government will be in control of your care even if you have Aetna, Blue Cross, Cigna or any other "qualified" insurer. Your insurer can pay only doctors who implement whatever regulations the federal government imposes in the name of improving health care "quality." That covers everything in medicine – from your MD's decisions on cardiac care and cancer care to childbirth (Sect. 1311, pg. 148).

To halt this attack on something as precious as life itself - your liberty - we must advance to the next battlegrounds, the U.S. courts and the Fall elections.

We cannot falter now.

The White House is launching a fifty state p.r. campaign, falsely telling the American people that the law just enacted against their will is to their benefit.

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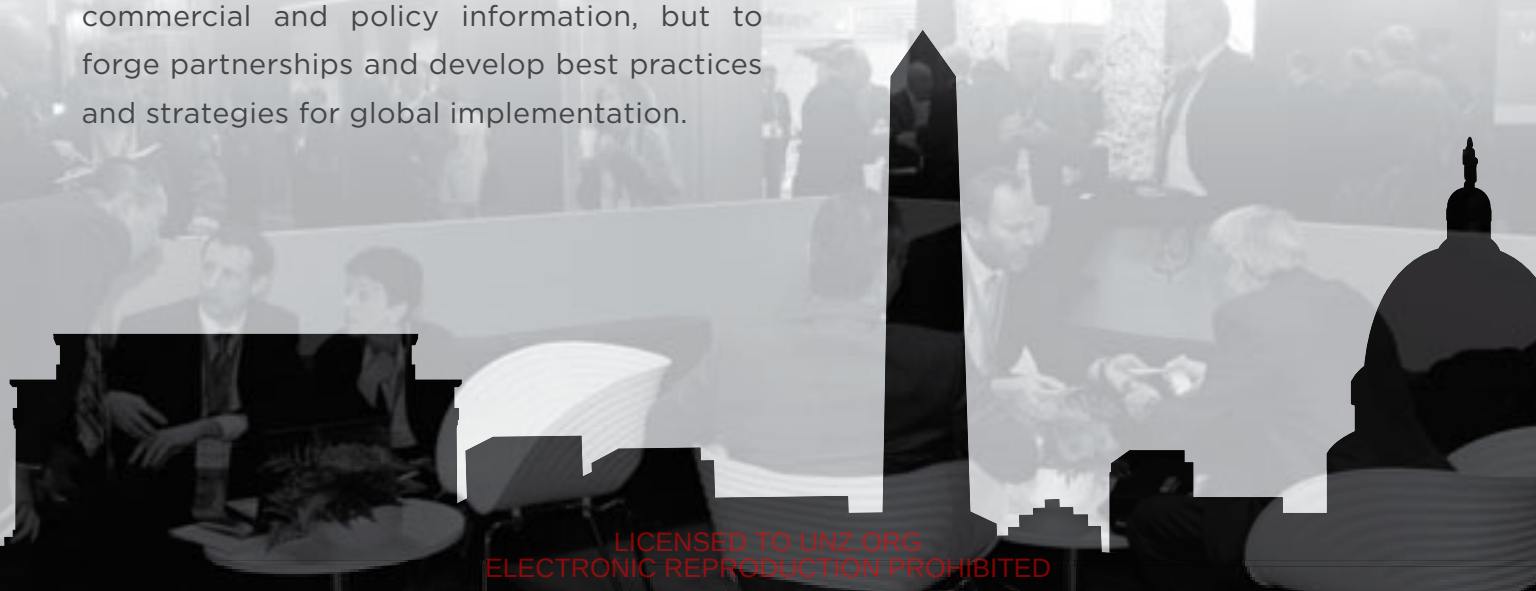

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THIS IS A COMBINED ISSUE. THE NEXT ISSUE OF THE WEEKLY STANDARD WILL APPEAR IN TWO WEEKS.

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Sore Winners

For a party basking in its "historic" health care reform, Democrats (not to mention their media camp followers) sure didn't seem very happy last week. They were, instead, obsessed with supposedly violent, racist opposition to their great "achievement" on the part of tea partiers and conservatives. This was more than a little unseemly. The violence they cited was almost entirely a figment of overactive, partisan imaginations. Everybody in public life (even THE SCRAPBOOK!) gets nasty emails. That's a permanent feature of the wonderful carnival of democracy in a country of 300 million people.

Perhaps needless to say, a victorious party unable to stomach opposition is a poor advertisement for democratic virtues. The only thing really running riot last week, as far as THE SCRAPBOOK could tell, was the persecution fantasies of the Obami. There were many choice specimens; it wasn't just the usual hysterics on MSNBC who were worried sick about hateful conservatives saying mean things.

The new brownshirts, or just anti-Obamacare?

Most striking to THE SCRAPBOOK: Even people on sports talk radio were *concerned*. ESPN's Tony Kornheiser hosts a sports talk show in Washington, and on Thursday he interrupted his normal mix of banter, self-reference, and shtick to bring in *Newsweek*'s Howard Fineman to dilate on the seamy underside of American politics.

"The America we live in has turned very violent, very partisan, and very, very ugly," Kornheiser began. "People who voted for health care, Democratic representatives who voted for health care, feel that their lives are in danger. And this is not made up of whole cloth."

Fineman agreed. "I've never seen anything like it," he said. "The anger, the fear, the intensity of it. . . . Normally I love everything that happens on the Hill in politics and 'is this a great country or what?'—that's my general attitude. But this was—it was scary. And I must say, my first thought after Bart Stupak made the deal that he did [throwing his pro-life scruples overboard] . . . my first thought is he should have 24/7 police protection from now on. Because there are, especially in the pro-life—on the fringes of the pro-life movement—there are some extremely, extremely scary people. . . . This is not a joking thing."

It sure isn't! Kornheiser groped for historic parallels. His first stop was the Southern backlash against the civil rights act: "Howard and I are old enough to remember the civil rights movement where there was this kind of violence as people thought that their lives were being threatened by a new world order in America."

But the opposition to Obamacare is apparently even worse. "The violent aspect of it," Kornheiser explained, "seems more frightening than anyone can remember." He asked Fineman if he really thought Bart Stupak "has to fear for his life?" Fineman

What They Were Thinking

Hillary Clinton at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Moscow, March 19

AT LEFT, REUTERS / GRIGORY DUKOR; TOP, NEWSCOM

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wasn't sure, but "the psychology is very scary," he warned.

Worse, even, than Birmingham, Alabama, circa 1963? Why, yes. Kornheiser worried that the opposition to Obamacare is so out of control it could morph into some kind of national socialist-populism. "Are we looking at, you know, the rise of a skinhead movement in effect?" he asked. "Not skinheads, but you know what I mean: the rise of some populist, horrifying movement that's going to sweep the country?"

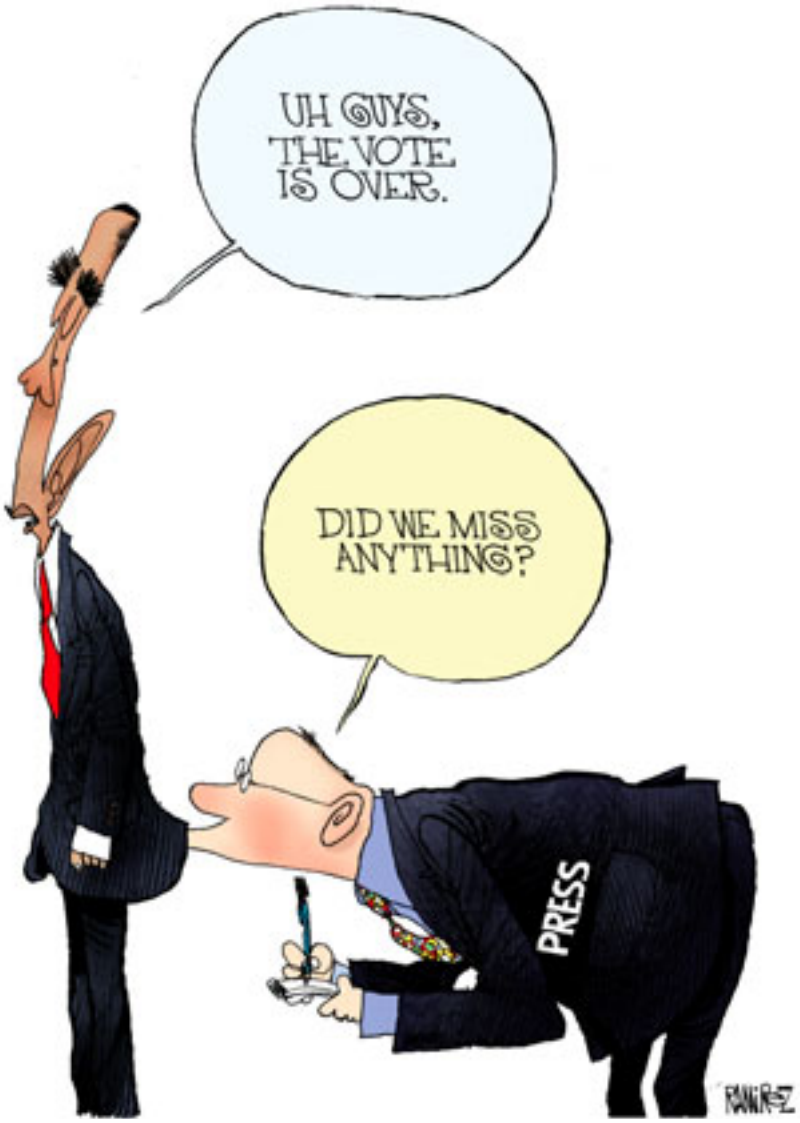
Here, finally, Fineman demurred. "No, I don't think so." It's good to see that there are some analogies even a *Newsweek* columnist finds implausible. Opponents of Obamacare: At least they're not skinheads. ♦

Taking Original Intent to a Whole New Level

"The Supreme Court in India has endorsed the right of unmarried couples to live together in a case involving an actress accused of outraging public decency. A three-judge panel in Delhi pointed out that even Hindu Gods Lord Krishna and Radha were co-habiting lovers" (BBC News, March 24). ♦

Profiles in Hackery

The publication of Karl Rove's memoir, *Courage and Consequence: My Life as a Conservative in the Fight*, inspired the *Washington Post* in a curious—although not unexpected—direction the other day: A feature in which the *Post*'s book editor invited six writers to choose "the least accurate political memoirs ever written." Get it? We're not claiming that Rove's memoirs are an affront to decent people everywhere, says the *Post*, but isn't this a clever device? And true to form, the *Post* recruited a fair and balanced panel—four leftists (James K. Galbraith, Ted Sorensen, Mike McCurry, Douglas Brinkley), one conservative (Steven F. Hayward), and



Christopher Buckley—for the purpose.

In some respects, the panelists' choices were predictable. Jamie Galbraith singled out Richard Nixon's memoir, which gave him the opportunity to resurrect a quotation from his late father, John Kenneth Galbraith. Christopher Buckley made a brief, jokey mention of Gandhi's autobiography. Douglas Brinkley burnished his scholarly reputation by bravely condemning James Buchanan's post-presidential apologia (1866).

The only one to rise fully to the bait, however, was Sorensen, who chose Karl Rove's memoir. And here The Scrapbook switches to its literary-critic homburg; for say what you will about Messrs. Brinkley, Buckley, Galbraith, Hayward, and McCurry, they are competent writers whose prose is clear and whose meaning is unmistakable. Not so with the author of *Kennedy* and *The Kennedy Legacy*. Ted Sorensen's entry, which is rambling, incoherent, and incomprehensible—full of puzzling asides and mysterious non sequiturs—may well be, in The Scrapbook's considered judgment, the worst essay on the least accurate political memoirs ever written.

Here's one quasi-readable example: "He doesn't reveal why or at whose direction the waterboarding tapes were destroyed, feels entitled to castigate Teddy Kennedy's criticism of the Bush Iraq war policy but makes no mention of President Bush's avoidance of service in Vietnam." And here's another: "It is not surprising that Karl Rove's

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memoirs . . . is a candidate for the least accurate of all political memoirs, in view of his pride at being known as the 'architect' of a presidency known for prevarication and two presidential campaigns featuring the charges (from which he distances himself) that Bush's principal opponent in 2000, John McCain, had fathered a black child and that his principal 2004 opponent, John Kerry, had been a 'swift boat coward.'"

Got that? Alas, it would seem that, after a half-century-plus of loyal partisan hackery and adulation of the Kennedy clan, Ted Sorensen's principal opponent these days is the English language. And to think that this should have happened to the author of *Profiles in Courage*. ♦

In Arms Control We Trust

The *Washington Post* refers in passing, in an article on U.S.-Russian arms talks, to "the Non-Proliferation Treaty, the global pact that contained the spread of nuclear weapons for decades." Really? THE SCRAPBOOK is reminded of the observation by Norman Podhoretz in the mid-1980s that modern, secular liberals, despite frequent self-congratulation for throwing off irrational faith, are in fact believers in arms control, the most widely held superstition since the Middle Ages. ♦

Sentences We Didn't Finish

'I know how the 'tea party' people feel, the anger, venom and bile that many of them showed during the recent House vote on health-care reform. I know because I want to spit on them, take one of their 'Obama Plan White Slavery' signs and knock every racist and homophobic tooth out of their Cro-Magnon heads. I am sick of these people . . . " (Courtland Milloy, "Congressmen Show Grace, Restraint in the Face of Disrespect," *Washington Post*, March 24). ♦

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War Music

There is a famous World War I poem by Siegfried Sassoon called "Everybody Sang!"

Everyone suddenly burst out singing;
And I was fill'd with such delight
As prison'd birds must find in freedom
Winging wildly across the white
Orchards and dark-green fields; on; on; and out of sight.

Everyone's voice was suddenly lifted,
And beauty came like the setting sun.
My heart was shaken with tears; and horror
Drifted away . . . O but every one
Was a bird; and the song was wordless; the singing will never be done.

Sassoon is describing the elation of the armistice and the happiness amongst those who suddenly knew in November 1918 that they would live. It's an easy feeling to share, for most of us view war as an aberration, to be survived if we're unlucky enough to have it forced upon us. Greek poets certainly had it so 2,500 years ago, and the sentiment became quite common even among the officer class with the rise of conscripted armies.

I thought of the poem recently while reading accounts of the siege of Dien Bien Phu in Indochina in 1954. At one of the crisis points in the eight-week battle, the tiny band of French defenders took the counter-offensive after 11 days of holding off a Viet-Minh assault on the key hills of the base's eastern defenses. Starting at 6:10 A.M. on April 10, three broken companies of the 6th Colonial Paratroop Battalion, about 180 men, retook one of the base's most contested points—a fortified hill known as Eliane 1. Casualties were heavy, but flamethrower teams had advanced under fire to burn the Viet-Minh out of the blockhouses, and the vicious hand-to-hand fighting that followed left the paratroopers in possession of the summit. The Viets immediately counterattacked. And though the French held on, the attacks kept coming. The battle hung in the balance at dark, and the fighting continued under the ghostly light of parachute flares. The French commander in charge of the attack radioed an appeal for any units that could be released from the other beleaguered strongpoints to come to their aid.

French paratroopers landing at Dien Bien Phu

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The first to arrive were the 2nd and 3rd companies of the 1st Foreign Legion Parachute Battalion. Though companies normally contain 150 to 200 men, a month of fighting at Dien Bien Phu had reduced these to about 50 riflemen each. As they ascended the hotly contested hill in the flares' green-tinged light, they began singing their regimental marching song, "Contre les Viets":

Against the Viets, against the enemy
Wherever duty beckons
Soldiers of France, soldiers of the country
We go up to the lines.

To its slow cadence—88 steps a minute, as opposed to the ordinary 120 of the French Army, which is why the Legion always brings up the rear of the parade in Paris on Bastille Day—they advanced into the maelstrom.

By report, they were singing in both French and German as befits a unit drawn from a wide variety of World War II veterans and a melody with a long history. For "Contre les Viets" was once "Contre les Rouges," the battle song of the Charlemagne regiment of the Waffen SS. Formed in 1944 to amalgamate French volunteers serving in various German Army units, the Charlemagne regiment was sent to fight on the Eastern Front where the verses to "Contre les Rouges" were written to the tune of "Die dunkle Nacht ist nun vorbei" ("The dark night is now over"), a popular Wehrmacht marching song. Quite a number of Foreign Legion marching songs have always been in German thanks to the heavy influxes of Alsatians and Lorrains in the 1870s and after World War I. There are even a few in English thanks to generations of Irish "wild geese."

The Legionnaires advancing up Eliane were singing as men once tended to do as they worked. And they weren't alone. Just after they began their march up the cratered and corpse-covered hill, the 2nd and 3rd companies of the 5th Vietnamese Parachute Battalion arrived to offer their help. Only recently raised, the Vietnamese paratroopers didn't have their own marching song, but they were proud warriors. They advanced in pursuit of the Legionnaires singing a slow march version of the Marseillaise. By midnight the hill was securely in paratrooper hands, and they would hold it for 20 more days.

These professional soldiers sang as they took the battle to the enemy. Sassoon's conscripts sang because they knew they would survive. War is better left to the professionals.

Robert Messenger

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Repeal & Defeat

President Obama's theory has always been that once health care reform passed, people would rally to it.

Well, they aren't rallying yet. The last Rasmussen poll before the House passed Obamacare had 54 percent of voters opposed and 41 percent in favor. The first survey taken after the president signed the bill showed 55 percent favoring repeal, with 42 percent supporting the legislation. (Independents were 59 to 35 percent for repeal.) And the generic congressional ballot remained virtually unchanged, with Republicans holding the steady 7-9 point lead they've had since the new year. If anything like that margin holds, Republicans will win the House in November.

But there are those who are rallying to Obamacare. Fidel Castro, for instance. Last Thursday he declared its passage "a miracle": "We consider health reform to have been an important battle and a success of [Obama's] government."

So, the verdict on Obamacare: The American people, No; Castro, Si.

Castro would presumably approve of some other recent Obama initiatives, too: The wholesale retreat on Iran sanctions and from any prospect of acting seriously to stop the Iranian nuclear weapons program. The fact that a Guantánamo detainee released in December—with much touting of how careful Team Obama was being in contrast with the Bush administration—has rejoined the battle against American troops in Afghanistan. And, of course, the stunning turn against Israel.

Why the exploitation of a minor disagreement with the Israeli government to justify a turn against Israel? President Obama cares about being popular—in America, certainly, but in the world as well. And not just because popularity in the world can help the United States achieve its foreign policy aims. But because, as James Ceaser argued in these pages in January, Obama aspires to be a leader of humanity, not merely a president of a single country.

And there's no better way to be a leader of humanity than to show disapproval of the Jewish state. Sure, Obama's turn against Israel will make it less likely that Palestinians will negotiate seriously with her. Sure, it will embolden radical Arabs and Muslims against those who would like their nations to take a different, more responsible, course. Sure, it's a distraction from the real challenge of Iran. But the turn against Israel is ultimately a key part of what Obamaism is all about. That's why there's been so little attempt by the administration to reassure friends of Israel that Obama has been acting more in sorrow than in anger. Obama's proud of his anger at the stiff-necked Jewish state. It puts him in sync with the rest of the world.

So, for the next three years, at home and abroad, we, the loyal opposition, have our work cut out for us. The Obama administration is unlikely to embrace the lessons Elliott Abrams spells out in this issue ("The Future of an Illusion"). But Congress and public opinion can push Middle East policy in a better direction and mitigate the damage Obama can do. Congress can also begin to undo the damage Obamacare threatens to cause. And then, in 2012, we can nominate a candidate who campaigns on a platform of solvency and liberty at home, and seriousness and greatness abroad.

This convention wants repeal. Your candidate wants repeal. And I am confident that the United States of America wants repeal.

—Franklin D. Roosevelt, 1932

This Republican nominee will need to appeal to the best traditions of both parties. In his 1980 acceptance speech, Ronald Reagan went out of his way to quote a couple of sentences from Franklin Roosevelt's 1932 remarks accepting the Democratic nomination for president.

Similarly, Reagan's heir can also quote from FDR's 1932 convention speech:

> I congratulate this convention for having had the courage fearlessly to write into its declaration of principles what an overwhelming majority here assembled really thinks. . . . This convention wants repeal. Your candidate wants repeal. And I am confident that the United States of America wants repeal.

(FDR was speaking about Prohibition; the GOP nominee will be speaking about Obamacare.)

As for foreign policy, the 2012 GOP nominee can quote John Kennedy in 1960:

> Abroad, the balance of power is shifting. There are new and more terrible weapons. . . . Friends have slipped into neutrality—and neutrals into hostility. . . . Courage . . . is our need today—leadership, not salesmanship. . . . Our ends will not be won by rhetoric and we can have faith in the future only if we have faith in ourselves. . . . That is the choice our nation must make—a choice . . . between national greatness and national decline.

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FDR in 1932, JFK in 1960, Reagan in 1980—all appealed to the virtue of courage. It will take courage to persevere over the next two and a half years to check Obama as president and then to defeat him. But the prize is worth the effort.

—*William Kristol*

Obamacare's Consequence

The liberal line is that President Obama has secured his place in history by signing into law the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2010. And secured it he has. Henceforth Obama will be remembered as the man who accelerated America's mad dash toward bankruptcy. He will be remembered as the leader who promoted a culture of dependency. He will be remembered as the figure who sacrificed a dream of national unity upon the altar of big government liberalism. It's true: Obama is now a president of consequence. And almost all of those consequences are bad.

The fiscal picture was bleak before Obama made it worse. Government debt is 60 percent of the gross domestic product and climbing. The deficit is projected to remain above 4 percent of GDP for the next decade. The week before the president signed his health care reform into law, Moody's warned that America's AAA bond rating may be downgraded. The day before the signing ceremony, the nation learned that Warren Buffett is a safer investment than U.S. treasuries. One needn't look across the Atlantic, where a penniless Greece is a supplicant to the IMF, to see our future. Look to California, where the economy is crippled by high taxes, high spending, and burdensome debt.

President Obama is an intelligent man. He knew there was no way a massive entitlement could get through Congress when spending, deficit, and debt are major issues. So he claimed that health care reform would help ameliorate America's fiscal problem, not exacerbate it. And for support he had the Congressional Budget Office (CBO), which found that, under a certain set of conditions—spending cuts, Medicare cuts, new taxes—health care reform would not only pay for itself but would reduce the deficit.

But what happens under real world conditions? What happens when the Medicare cuts and the excise tax disappear and the subsidies are more generous than expected? When Representative Paul Ryan of Wisconsin asked the CBO these questions, he was told the deficit would increase by a considerable margin. Which outcome is more likely: a Congress that cuts services, imposes taxes on favored constituencies, and refrains from spending? Or a Congress that goes instead on a fact-finding mission to Djibouti while making promises it cannot keep?

But balancing the books was never Obama's primary goal. Equality was. For decades, liberals have decried America's patchwork system of health insurance and have sought to provide coverage for all. But rather than deregulate health markets and provide consumers with the tools they need to spur competition, reduce prices, and promote innovation, liberals chose another path. They chose to increase regulation and make government the intermediary between taxpayer dollars and the insurance companies. Through the individual mandate, the Democrats have ordered every adult American to purchase a consumer product. And if an American cannot afford that product, government will subsidize him, thereby directing public money to private profit.

How long before the Democrats figure out that it would be cheaper for government to eliminate the middleman and become the insurer of first resort? Perhaps sooner than you think. (Some already have.) A portent is the student loan industry. Last week Congress, after years of subsidizing loans originating in private banks, decreed that all loans would now originate directly from the federal government. A narrow partisan majority effected the drastic policy change. This is the process by which markets shrink, choice is curtailed, and government dependency grows. It's become commonplace.

What is most striking is the impact of health care on Obama's presidency. Liberals are already touting his legislative victory as the catalyst for a domestic and foreign policy rebound. To the contrary: Obama is enfeebled. Health care reform has helped turn large swaths of independents against him. It has nullified the chance for bipartisan cooperation in this Congress. It has exposed him as weak: Despite 39 speeches on the topic, despite a huge investment of political capital, the health bill passed by a margin of five votes. Thirty-two Democrats defected. The public opposed this law.

Gone is the charismatic young man who told the 2004 Democratic National Convention in Boston that there was no Blue America and no Red America, only the United States of America. All that remains is a partisan liberal Democrat whose health care policy bulldozed public opinion, enraged the electorate, poisoned the Congress, and set into motion a sequence of events the outcome of which cannot be foreseen.

This tarnished White House complains incessantly about the crises it inherited from its predecessor. Crises? You ain't seen nothing yet.

—*Matthew Continetti*

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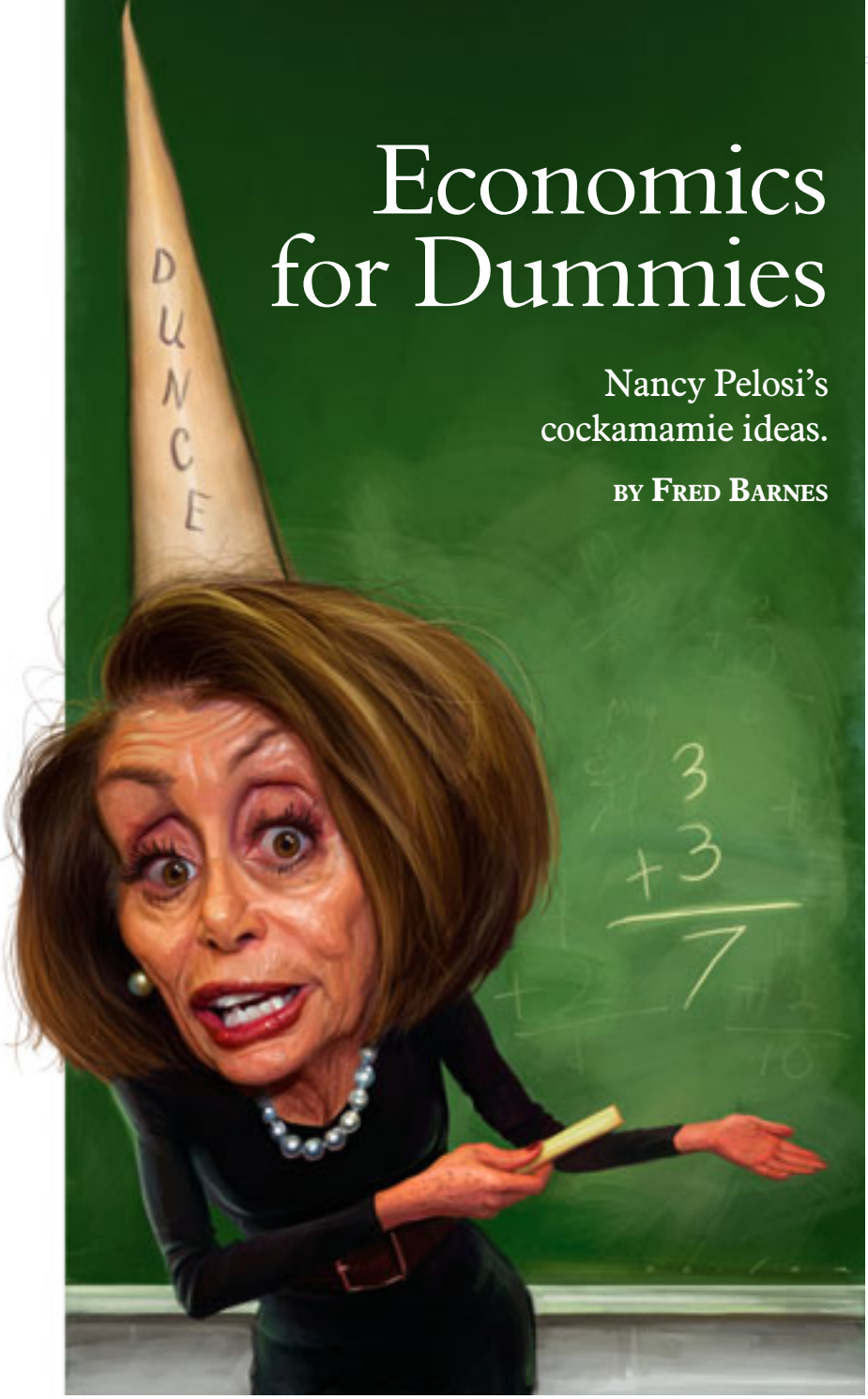
Economics for Dummies

Nancy Pelosi's cockamamie ideas.

BY FRED BARNES



JASON SEILER

You probably missed it. But a new school of economics was unveiled last week shortly after health care reform passed the House of Representatives. Speaker Nancy Pelosi stepped to the podium in the House chamber and said the legislation will "unleash tremendous entrepreneurial power" and create millions of jobs.

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"Our economy needs something new, a jolt," she said. And she and her Democratic colleagues had just delivered it.

Pelosi, author of the new departure in economic thinking, said we should now "imagine a society and an economy where a person could change jobs without losing health insurance, where they could be self-employed or start a small business." With health care reform, "their entrepreneurial spirit will be unleashed."

That's not the half of it. While insuring 32 million more people, making insurance "more affordable for the middle class," producing "a healthier America through prevention, through wellness and innovation," and a whole lot more—in addition to all that, the legislation creates "4 million jobs in the life of the bill and [does] all that by saving the taxpayer $1.3 trillion."

The proper response if you believe Pelosi even a little bit is, "Thank you, Nancy!" or perhaps simply, "Wow!" But restrain yourself. Pelosi has a gift for economic lunacy. This wouldn't be especially worrisome, except Pelosi is second in line to the presidency and would be prime minister if we had a parliamentary system.

So far as I know, Pelosi is the first person in the universe to regard the lack of portability of health insurance as a deathblow to entrepreneurship. This idea is, to put it mildly, farfetched. Is there evidence that budding entrepreneurs have been deterred by the fear of losing health insurance for a spell? Don't bet on it. Are future Michael Dells or Ted Turners or Pierre Omidyars suppressing their entrepreneurial juices because their doctor visits aren't covered? Please.

Pelosi, as is the habit of Democrats, cited an uncheckable and probably imaginary case. "If they had a child with diabetes who was bipolar … they would be job-locked," she insisted. Maybe so. But a job-locked entrepreneur? It's surely overkill to revolutionize our entire health care system for the sake of that rare bird. Besides, there's COBRA, the federal law that permits an employee who quits to stay insured for months.

The prospect of 4 million new jobs as a result of health care reform is also fanciful. It's based on a study by two economists sponsored by the Center for American Progress (CAP), an advocacy group for liberal Democratic legislation. The study claims the reform legislation will modernize the health care system, generate administrative savings, slow the growth in insurance premiums, and allow businesses to hire between 250,000 and 400,000 employees a year for a decade. On the

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basis of this, Pelosi acts as if 4 million new jobs are a slam dunk. She actually appears to believe it.

The problem is the assumption about savings. Any savings from modernization are likely to be more than offset by medical breakthroughs that balloon the cost of care. The Beacon Hill Institute in Boston, using a less rosy scenario than CAP, reached the more realistic conclusion that health care reform will destroy 120,000 to 700,000 jobs over the next 10 years.

The CAP study echoes one of Obama's cherished claims. Since his days as a presidential candidate, he's been insisting reform will "bend" health spending downward. But this is more than a stretch. It's a dream. History tells a different story. When free or subsidized health care is offered by the government (Medicare, Medicaid), the cost far exceeds initial (and later) projections. This has been the case for state as well as federal programs. Indeed, it's a worldwide phenomenon. The one exception is the Medicare prescription drug benefit, which uniquely relies on free market competition. Pelosi, true to form, wants to replace that competition with price controls.

Pelosi is a faithful believer in the notion you can defy the laws of economic gravity and get more for less, once government steps in. Logic suggests otherwise. Health insurers will be forced to offer more benefits, including free preventive care, no annual or lifetime limits on coverage, and insurance for those with preexisting conditions. That's just for starters. New taxes will be imposed on insurance companies and medical device manufacturers. A package of new benefits and tax hikes is hardly a recipe for cheaper premiums and lower overall health care costs.

Companies have already begun to figure out that their cost of doing business will rise, which means they won't be hiring. Layoffs are more likely. Medtronic, which makes medical implements, said it might have to cut 1,000 jobs. It's not only what businesses will pay for health insurance that is bound to increase. They'll lose a tax break for providing drug coverage for retirees. And they'll pay a higher Medicare tax for each employee.

There is one potential cost-cutting measure in the health reform legislation. High-cost, "Cadillac" insurance plans will face a 40 percent tax, which is certain to kill such plans and trim insurance costs.

But wait a minute. Pelosi didn't like that tax. Four days after the reform bill passed, the Senate and House passed a second measure, dubbed "reconciliation." Among other things, it delayed the 40 percent tax until 2018, a pretty good indication that the tax will never be levied.

Pelosi was in a joyful mood when reconciliation sailed through the House. It boosted health care spending, increased regulation, raised doctors' fees, and added new taxes. Nonetheless, she asserted: "With this legislation in place, families will have access to *even more affordable* care" [emphasis added]. Her perverse school of economics had been vindicated again. ♦

Appeasing the Mullahs

How the Obama administration learned to love the Iranian bomb. BY STEPHEN F. HAYES

On March 24, Obama administration officials briefed reporters on what was described as a very positive development in the U.S. effort to keep Iran from getting a nuclear weapon: China had agreed to participate in a conference call to discuss sanctions.

Three weeks earlier, China had all but ruled out sanctions. "As everyone knows, pressure and sanctions are not the fundamental way forward to resolving the Iran nuclear issue and cannot fundamentally solve the issue," said Chinese foreign minister Yang Jiechi on March 7. Just to persuade China to rejoin the discussions about sanctions, the United States further watered down the proposed language of a United Nations Security Council resolution.

In early February, the Obama administration had given reporters a similar update on its progress, this one about Russia. According to Jennifer Loven from the Associated Press, White House officials said Russia was on board with sanctions and was "not seen as a problem anymore in getting a tougher new sanctions package."

But by the time the administration had convinced China to join the phone call, Russia was teetering. A spokesman for Russian prime minister Vladimir Putin said only that Russian support for sanctions "was possible," adding ominously that sanctions "do not always help to resolve such an issue" and are often "counterproductive."

Even before they were weakened, there were already serious questions about whether the proposed sanctions would do anything at all to retard Iran's nuclear progress. Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu does not think so, and he is not alone. At a joint appearance with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in February, Saudi Arabia's foreign minister, Prince Saud al Faisal, took the unusual step of publicly disparaging the U.S. proposals. With Clinton at his side, he said: "Sanctions are a long-term solution. They may work,

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we can't judge. But we see the issue in the shorter term maybe because we are closer to the threat. . . . So we need an immediate resolution rather than a gradual resolution."

So here we are. After 15 months of pleading with the mullahs and entreating our allies for help, Barack Obama's Iran policy is such a dismal failure that administration flacks are left to tout as a breakthrough Chinese participation in a phone call to discuss watered-down U.N. sanctions that few believe will work.

And Iran's enrichment proceeds apace.

In October 2009, Kenneth Pollack, a Clinton administration official and author of a first-rate history of U.S.-Iranian relations, said, "If by early next year we are getting nothing through diplomacy and sanctions, the entire policy is going to be revealed as a charade." Plan B, Pollack noted, is "containment," adding: "In their heart of hearts I think the Obama administration knows that this is where this is going."

Senator John McCain agrees. Asked if the Obama administration's policy on Iran was tantamount to containment, he agreed. "Yes, they're leaking it out. You see it all over the place. I don't know whether they've adopted it or not but it sure looks like it," he said in an interview last week.

Indeed, several pro-Obama columnists and commentators have already floated "a robust containment strategy against Iran," to use the words of Fareed Zakaria. Back in July 2009, Hillary Clinton was certainly using the language of containment when she raised the prospect of a "defense umbrella" in the region to protect U.S. allies from a nuclear Iran. The *New York Times*'s David Sanger, who writes frequently on nuclear issues, wrote in mid-March that "the administration is deep into containment now—though it insists its increases in defensive power in the Gulf are meant to deter a conventional attack by Iran."

McCain read from a long list of administration statements warning Iran against nuclear weapons development: "There is a huge disconnect between what they are doing and how we are responding, and it reflects the wishful thinking that has characterized appeasement policies in the past." McCain mentioned the famous photograph of Jimmy Carter kissing Leonid Brezhnev.

McCain then graduated to an even harsher comparison. He said he had been rereading William Manchester's biography of Winston Churchill and was struck by the similarities between the naïveté of Neville Chamberlain and the willingness of the Obama administration to accommodate the mullahs. "They're just flailing. A few days ago the president said he wanted to talk some more," McCain said, incredulous, referring to Obama's message on Nowruz, the Iranian new year, which renewed the administration's offer for negotiations. The overture, following Iran's dismissal of several previous "final" deadlines for new talks, is "consistent with the thread of appeasement throughout history. It's that same idea that if we're nice to our enemies, they'll do what we want."

But even as Obama extends the

Iranian students protesting U.N. sanctions in 2006

ASSOCIATED PRESS / HASAN SARBAKHSHIA

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deadlines, he talks tough. "It's one of our highest priorities to make sure that Iran doesn't possess a nuclear weapon," he said on March 17, in an interview with Bret Baier of Fox News. The problem is that if keeping Iran from getting a nuclear weapon is one of the highest priorities, the very highest priority seems to be avoiding military conflict at all cost.

"The last thing the Middle East needs now is another war," Secretary of Defense Robert Gates told the *New York Times* back in the spring of 2008. Gates noted that he had worked on a policy paper on Iran with Zbigniew Brzezinski at the Council on Foreign Relations in 2004. Gates added: "Based on what I heard from every expert, then and now, I think there's a risk that an attack would strengthen Ahmadinejad and solidify the Iranian people's support for their regime." (Brzezinski is one of those arguing strenuously for containment today.)

In a recent interview with al Arabiya, Hillary Clinton was twice asked directly whether "a military strike is off the table." Clinton did not offer the standard everything-is-on-the-table caveat—a pointed omission—and went to great lengths to emphasize that military action is "not what the United States was planning to do."

Gates and Clinton are the administration's hawks.

The manufactured dispute with Israel may well be additional evidence of the president's determination to avoid a military confrontation. The Obama administration took what was a minor misunderstanding about Jerusalem housing and made it a serious test of a longstanding alliance. This was no accident.

Senior officials in the Israeli government are perplexed. Some have speculated that Obama wants to weaken Israel before any serious Middle East peace talks. That's possible. A more likely explanation is that the shabby treatment of Netanyahu grows out of Obama's eagerness for a "new beginning" to America's relationship with Muslims around the world.

But there is a third possibility. In private, the Obama administration has repeatedly warned Israel against a preemptive strike on Iran's nuclear facilities. Isolating Israel in this way sends the same message publicly; it says, in effect, "You think we overreacted to a housing spat in Jerusalem? Try bombing Iran."

Obama officials are loath to talk about Israel, Iran, and the bomb in public. They offer platitudes, and they focus obsessively on diplomacy that virtually no one thinks will prevent Iran from becoming a nuclear power.

Ultimately, of course, it doesn't matter whether China participates in a conference call about weak U.N. sanctions that will have a negligible effect on Iran's behavior. And containment, the de facto policy on Iran today, will become the acknowledged Obama administration approach to Iran.

Which means, of course, that Iran will have the bomb. ♦

MICHAEL RAMIREZ

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Which Side Are They On?

American labor unions and how they got that way.

BY STEPHEN SCHWARTZ

Labor unions in the United States were not always tied to the Democratic party and to a leftist ideological agenda. Once upon a time, the American Federation of Labor (AFL) stood at odds with the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO); the former resisted statist labor law changes and leftist union policies beginning in the 1930s and the latter supported them.

The AFL and the CIO united in 1955, but two decades before, William Green, president of the older AFL movement, denounced the CIO in terms familiar to present-day tea party critics of the Obama administration. On September 7, 1937, as reported in the *Washington Post*, Green assailed CIO leader John L. Lewis for "subordinating the welfare of workers to personal political ambitions . . . and encouraging communistic support." Green warned that CIO ambitions could "pave the way to a fascist dictatorship."

The AFL's Green, who generally supported the New Deal but criticized Franklin Roosevelt's diplomatic recognition of Soviet Russia, pledged that his labor organizers "are not seeking political preferment. They are not moved by a consuming ambition to establish themselves as political dictators." In today's era of "card check" unionism, when rank-and-file union members have almost no voice, the message seems uncannily relevant: "Shall we be ruled from the bottom up or from the top down, by an individual who is governed only by a consuming ambition?"

Criticism of governmental unionism in the late 1930s was not limited to William Green. The CIO unions were frequently imposed in the workplace by orders from the National Labor Relations Board (which included numerous prominent Communists) in disregard of worker preferences for the AFL. The CIO unions were also replete with Communist officials. Labor militants who were anti-Stalinist kept their unions in the AFL.

Samuel Gompers, AFL founder

The anti-Communist unionists included, in the New York garment industry, immigrant Jewish social democrats who had fought the czars and the Bolsheviks in Russia, and Italian-American leftists who were the most serious enemies of Mussolini. The Communists and their enthusiasts in the media relentlessly attacked Green and the AFL unions as enemies of the "progressive" agenda.

The anti-Soviet labor leaders gained credibility after the Stalin-Hitler pact of August 1939, which was soon consummated with the Russo-German partition of Poland. Green intensified his campaign against totalitarian influences in the U.S. government. The *Washington Post* reported on October 5, 1939, a month after Germany's invasion of its eastern neighbor, and almost three weeks after Stalin joined in, that Green had demonstrated his mettle by cautioning that "Stalin's agents and followers occupied 'high and influential' places in American government, schools, and labor organizations."

But after the Second World War, proponents of big government and top-down rule regained their influence over labor. By the end of the 20th century, although industrial unions were in drastic decline, their officials chafed at, and ignored, legal reforms intended to restore the rights of union members over issues like the partisan political use of their dues. In its 1988 *Beck* decision, the Supreme Court found against the Communications Workers of America. The court held that individual union members could opt out of paying that component of union dues disbursed for political and lobbying purposes. But the rule established in *CWA* v. *Beck* is routinely flouted.

Card check—a substitute for using the secret ballot when deciding union representation—is the lat-

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est big labor demand. It may fail, but statist unionists have more weapons in their arsenal. The National Mediation Board (NMB), another New Deal institution, which administers labor relations in the rail and airline industries, now includes former union officials as two of its three members: Harry Hoglander from the Air Line Pilots Association and Linda Puchala, a veteran of the Association of Flight Attendants.

The politicization of labor was significantly boosted when the center of gravity for the unions shifted from industry to the public sector. According to the Center for Responsive Politics, labor accounted for six of the top ten political contributors in America from 1989 to 2009, half of them in the public sector and all channeling funds to the Democrats.

Over 20 years, the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees has donated $42 million, 98 percent to Democrats; the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, $31.5 million, 97 percent to Democrats; the National Education Association, $30 million, 92 percent to Democrats; the Laborers Union, $29 million, 92 percent; and the Teamsters, $28 million, 92 percent. Most important, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), considered the main Obamaite union, has disbursed $28 million to politicians, with 95 percent to Democrats. The Laborers, Teamsters, and SEIU have been plagued by internal abuses, and hardly stand as schools for citizenship and democratic participation, as unions were promised to be by Samuel Gompers, the main founder of the AFL.

Fascism did not emerge from the New Deal, as William Green feared, although after the Second World War his concern about Communist infiltration was vindicated by the exposure of Alger Hiss and other spies for Moscow. But antistatist, politically independent unionism is almost impossible to imagine today. And the underlying problem of the political manipulation of union members is as great as it has ever been. ♦

False Start?

Don't believe the hype about the new arms treaty with Russia. BY MICHAEL ANTON

Conservatives are already criticizing the new United States-Russia arms control treaty. Nobody but those privy to the negotiations knows yet what the treaty actually says, but the critics are probably right to be worried.

For what we do know—and have known for months—is troubling enough. Presidents Obama and Medvedev worked out the broad outlines of an agreement in the middle of 2009. Each side would reduce their operationally deployed warheads by about a third (the exact figure turns out to be 1,550). Delivery vehicles—not covered by the more recent Moscow Treaty—will go down to 800. Of those, only 700 can be deployed at any given time, a very thin margin for reserve forces. This treaty, like the last one, does not cover nondeployed warheads, so presumably each side will (as ever) maintain a large reserve stockpile. Only under the New START Treaty, the ratio of delivery vehicles to warheads will undermine the point of such an arrangement.

Perhaps that is the point—to give each side an incentive to accelerate the dismantlement of older, nondeployed weapons. In any event, it's certainly a gift to the Russians, who can barely afford to keep 800 missiles and bombers deployed as it is. Think of a minor league team negotiating a salary cap with the Yankees: It's in their interest to push the figure down as low as possible.

The iron rule of international negotiation: Whoever wants the piece of paper more loses on substance. Last time around, it was the Russians. President Bush had already decided to slash the deployed U.S. arsenal by thousands of warheads and was going to do so no matter what the Russians said or did. But at an East Room press conference in November 2001, he was sandbagged by Vladimir Putin, who made clear he wanted a signing ceremony with all the trappings. After making clear that he preferred no treaty, President Bush graciously acquiesced: "If we need to write it down on a piece of paper, I'll be glad to do that."

Thus the 2001 Bush Nuclear Posture Review became the basis for the Moscow Treaty. We gave away essentially nothing but our signature. We flattered Russia's great power pretensions to gain some cooperation in the war on terror. (Whether, in the end, we actually got any is another matter.)

This time, things are different. Obama wanted the paper (and the attendant bragging rights and signing ceremony) much more than Medvedev. So what price did he pay for it? That low delivery vehicle threshold, for starters.

The last major sticking points in the negotiations had to do with telemetry—information from ballistic missile tests. We wanted data from the Russians on their advanced SS-27 ICBM; they wanted telemetry for our missile defense interceptors. Telemetry on ICBMs has been a staple of prior treaties; defensive interceptors have never been covered.

Comments from Secretary of Defense Gates at the press briefing at the White House on March 26 suggest that we got the data on the Russian ICBM: "There still is a bilateral agreement to exchange telemetry information on up to five missile launches a year." But no specific mention was made of missile defense telemetry. Both Gates and the undersecretary of state for arms control insisted that the treaty does not "constrain" missile defense efforts on the U.S. side.

Michael Anton served in national security positions in the recent Bush administration.

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Such careful wording, however, does not rule out providing defense interceptor telemetry to the Russians, who would of course use it to make their newest ICBM more able to defeat any American defense system. If we indeed made this concession, it's likely because this administration (like every administration since Ronald Reagan's) has not contemplated building a missile defense system capable of defeating a large onslaught of hostile ICBMs and SLBMs. Our efforts have been focused rather on intercepting a small number of missiles fired, presumably, by a "rogue state." Small comfort given Russia's close relationship with Iran.

Formally linking missile defense to offensive strategic weapons would be a bad move on America's part. It would also undercut the logic of missile defense: If our system is only meant to deter the likes of Iran and North Korea, why make it part of a deal with Russia? Russia clearly sees its own interests furthered by increasing our headaches. Constraining us on missile defense helps with that goal. For us, it amounts to giving away a lot and getting little—a hallmark of U.S.-Russian relations under Obama.

But at this point all we really know is that an agreement has been reached. We don't know the details, and it's possible they still have not been hashed out. Sources indicate that the classified annexes remain to be finalized. One thing we do know, says a key Hill staffer, is that "If the Russians are happy, I'm not sure the Senate will be able to ratify."

President Obama will play the deal up as big and welcome news for his disarmament agenda as he prepares to host a nuclear materials conference in Washington this month and to attend the Nonproliferation Treaty Conference in New York this May. But there was arguably bigger news last Friday: news which won't get much coverage and undercuts his nuclear agenda.

Last November, JASON—an advisory group of independent scientists first convened in 1960—finished a study of the U.S. nuclear arsenal. Their report is classified but the executive summary is not. The summary seemed to indicate that the Life Extension Program (LEP), the government's efforts to ensure the long-term reliability of our nuclear arsenal, was working just fine. The Obama administration and its allies on the left used this as evidence of there being no need to do anything that might be interpreted as building new warheads.

But leaks undermining this narrative quickly appeared. People familiar with the full report indicated that it didn't quite support the executive summary's interpretation of the LEP. Now we know those leaks were correct.

Ohio Republican representative Michael Turner asked the heads of the three national nuclear laboratories to give a frank assessment of the report. Their letters were released on Friday and in their view, Life Extension probably won't cut it over the long haul, and the classified report actually spells out many of the reasons.

Russian president Dmitri Medvedev visiting a missile base

REUTERS / RIA NOVOSTI

This is bad news for the president's disarmament agenda. He loses a valuable piece of high-level cover for his insistence that the United States not undertake any real modernization of our nuclear arsenal. It's very bad news for Vice President Biden, who is reported to be the biggest opponent in the administration of the Reliable Replacement Warhead (RRW) concept—a new long-lived warhead design that was defunded in 2008. It's good news for Secretary Gates, who supports RRW.

But even this may have a silver lining for the president. The New START Treaty faces an uphill ratification battle. Its chances get dimmer the less seriously the administration treats Republican concerns about stockpile longevity. To have a shot at getting the treaty ratified this year, the president is going to have to bend on warhead modernization. This will anger the left. But the scientific cover for ditching RRW that was yanked away by the lab directors can be spun as political cover for moving ahead with modernization. To get the nine extra Senate votes he needs for his treaty, the president can now say, without dissembling, that a reliable arsenal requires doing more than LEP currently encompasses.

Such an argument would help the president get his treaty, help America maintain a credible deterrent—and have the additional advantage of being true. ♦

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REPEAL

Why and how Obamacare must be undone

By Yuval Levin

In the days since the enactment of their health care plan, Democrats in Washington have been desperately seeking to lodge the new program in the pantheon of American public-policy achievements. House Democratic whip James Clyburn compared the bill to the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Vice President Biden argued it vindicates a century of health reform efforts by Democrats and Republicans alike. House speaker Nancy Pelosi said "health insurance reform will stand alongside Social Security and Medicare in the annals of American history."

Even putting aside the fact that Social Security and Medicare are going broke and taking the rest of the government with them, these frantic forced analogies are preposterous. The new law is a ghastly mess, which began as a badly misguided technocratic pipe dream and was then degraded into ruinous incoherence by the madcap process of its enactment.

The appeals to history are understandable, however, because the Democrats know that the law is also exceedingly vulnerable to a wholesale repeal effort: Its major provisions do not take effect for four years, yet in the interim it is likely to begin wreaking havoc with the health care sector—raising insurance premiums, health care costs, and public anxieties. If those major provisions do take effect, moreover, the true costs of the program will soon become clear, and its unsustainable structure will grow painfully obvious. So, to protect it from an angry public and from Republicans armed with alternatives, the new law must be made to seem thoroughly established and utterly irrevocable—a fact on the ground that must be lived with; tweaked, if necessary, at the edges, but at its core politically untouchable.

But it is no such thing. Obamacare starts life strikingly unpopular and looks likely to grow more so as we get to know it in the coming months and years. The entire House of Representatives, two-thirds of the Senate, and the president will be up for election before the law's most significant provisions become fully active. The American public is concerned about spending, deficits, debt, taxes, and overactive government to an extent seldom seen in American history. The excesses of the plan seem likely to make the case for alternative gradual and incremental reforms only stronger.

And the repeal of Obamacare is essential to any meaningful effort to bring down health care costs, provide greater stability and security of coverage to more Americans, and address our entitlement crisis. Both the program's original design and its contorted final form make repairs at the

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edges unworkable. The only solution is to repeal it and pursue genuine health care reform in its stead.

FROM BAD TO WORSE

To see why nothing short of repeal could suffice, we should begin at the core of our health care dilemma. Conservative and liberal experts generally agree on the nature of the problem with American health care financing: There is a shortage of incentives for efficiency in our methods of paying for coverage and care, and therefore costs are rising much too quickly, leaving too many people unable to afford insurance. We have neither a fully public nor quite a private system of insurance, and three key federal policies—the fee-for-service structure of Medicare, the disjointed financing of Medicaid, and the open-ended tax exclusion for employer-provided insurance—drive spending and costs ever upward.

The disagreement about just how to fix that problem has tended to break down along a familiar dispute between left and right: whether economic efficiency is best achieved by the rational control of expert management or by the lawful chaos of open competition.

Liberals argue that the efficiency we lack would be achieved by putting as much as possible of the health care sector into one big "system" in which the various irregularities could be evened and managed out of existence by the orderly arrangement of rules and incentives. The problem now, they say, is that health care is too chaotic and answers only to the needs of the insurance companies. If it were made more orderly, and answered to the needs of the public as a whole, costs could be controlled more effectively.

Conservatives argue that the efficiency we lack would be achieved by allowing price signals to shape the behavior of both providers and consumers, creating more savings than we could hope to produce on purpose, and allowing competition and informed consumer choices to exercise a downward pressure on prices. The problem now, they say, is that third-party insurance (in which employers buy coverage or the government provides it, and consumers almost never pay doctors directly) makes health care too opaque, hiding the cost of everything from everyone and so making real pricing and therefore real economic efficiency impossible. If it were made more transparent and answered to the wishes of consumers, prices could be controlled more effectively.

That means that liberals and conservatives want to pursue health care reform in roughly opposite directions. Conservatives propose ways of introducing genuine market forces into the insurance system—to remove obstacles to choice and competition, pool risk more effectively, and reduce the inefficiency in government health care entitlements while helping those for whom entry to the market is too expensive (like Americans with preexisting conditions) gain access to the same high quality care. Such targeted efforts would build on what is best about the system we have in order to address what needs fixing.

Liberals, meanwhile, propose ways of moving Americans to a more fully public system, by arranging conditions in the health care sector (through a mix of mandates, regulations, taxes, and subsidies) to nudge people toward public coverage, which could be more effectively managed. This is the approach the Democrats originally proposed last year. The idea was to end risk-based insurance by making it essentially illegal for insurers to charge people different prices based on their health, age, or other factors; to force everyone to participate in the system so that the healthy do not wait until they're sick to buy insurance; to align various insurance reforms in a way that would raise premium costs in the private market; and then to introduce a government-run insurer that, whether through Medicare's negotiating leverage or through various exemptions from market pressures, could undersell private insurers and so offer an attractive "public option" to people being pushed out of employer plans into an increasingly expensive individual market.

Conservatives opposed this scheme because they believed a public insurer could not introduce efficiencies that would lower prices without brutal rationing of services. Liberals supported it because they thought a public insurer would be fairer and more effective.

But in order to gain 60 votes in the Senate last winter, the Democrats were forced to give up on that public insurer, while leaving the other components of their scheme in place. The result is not even a liberal approach to escalating costs but a ticking time bomb: a scheme that will build up pressure in our private insurance system while offering no escape. Rather than reform a system that everyone agrees is unsustainable, it will subsidize that system and compel participation in it—requiring all Americans to pay ever-growing premiums to insurance companies while doing essentially nothing about the underlying causes of those rising costs.

Liberal health care mavens understand this. When the public option was removed from the health care bill in the Senate, Howard Dean argued in the *Washington Post* that the bill had become merely a subsidy for insurance companies, and failed completely to control costs. Liberal health care blogger Jon Walker said, "The Senate bill will fail to stop the rapidly approaching meltdown of our health care system, and anyone is a fool for thinking otherwise." Markos Moulitsas of the Daily Kos called the bill "unconscionable" and said it lacked "any mechanisms to control costs."

Indeed, many conservatives, for all their justified opposition to a government takeover of health care, have not yet

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quite seen the full extent to which this bill will exacerbate the cost problem. It is designed to push people into a system that will not exist—a health care bridge to nowhere—and so will cause premiums to rise and encourage significant dislocation and then will initiate a program of subsidies whose only real answer to the mounting costs of coverage will be to pay them with public dollars and so increase them further. It aims to spend a trillion dollars on subsidies to large insurance companies and the expansion of Medicaid, to micromanage the insurance industry in ways likely only to raise premiums further, to cut Medicare benefits without using the money to shore up the program or reduce the deficit, and to raise taxes on employment, investment, and medical research.

The case for averting all of that could hardly be stronger. And the nature of the new law means that it must be undone—not trimmed at the edges. Once implemented fully, it would fairly quickly force a crisis that would require another significant reform. Liberals would seek to use that crisis, or the prospect of it, to move the system toward the approach they wanted in the first place: arguing that the only solution to the rising costs they have created is a public insurer they imagine could outlaw the economics of health care. A look at the fiscal collapse of the Medicare system should rid us of the notion that any such approach would work, but it remains the left's preferred solution, and it is their only plausible next move—indeed, some Democrats led by Iowa senator Tom Harkin have already begun talking about adding a public insurance option to the plan next year.

Because Obamacare embodies a rejection of incrementalism, it cannot be improved in small steps. Fixing our health care system in the wake of the program's enactment will require a big step—repeal of the law before most of it takes hold—followed by incremental reforms addressing the public's real concerns.

THE CASE FOR REPEAL

That big step will not be easy to take. The Democratic party has invested its identity and its future in the fate of this new program, and Democrats control the White House and both houses of Congress. That is why the conservative health care agenda must now also be an electoral agenda—an effort to refine, inform, and build on public opposition to the new program and to the broader trend toward larger and more intrusive, expensive, and fiscally reckless government in the age of Obama. Obamacare is the most prominent emblem of that larger trend, and its repeal must be at the center of the conservative case to voters in the coming two election cycles.

The design of the new law offers some assistance. In an effort to manipulate the program's Congressional Budget Office score so as to meet President Obama's goal of spending less than $1 trillion in its first decade, the Democrats' plan will roll out along a very peculiar trajectory. No significant entitlement benefits will be made available for four years, but some significant taxes and Medicare cuts—as well as regulatory reforms that may begin to push premium prices up, especially in the individual market—will begin before then. And the jockeying and jostling in the insurance sector in preparation for the more dramatic changes that begin in 2014 will begin to be felt very soon.

To blunt the effects of all this, the Democrats have worked mightily to give the impression that some attractive benefits, especially regarding the rules governing insurance companies, will begin immediately. This year, they say, insurance companies will be prevented from using the preexisting medical condition of a child to exclude that child's parents from insurance coverage, and a risk-pool program will be established to help a small number of adults who are excluded too. Additionally, insurance policies cannot be cancelled retroactively when someone becomes sick, some annual and lifetime limits on coverage are prohibited, and "children" may stay on their parents' insurance until they turn 26. Obamacare's champions hope these reforms might build a constituency for the program.

But these benefits are far too small to have that effect. The preexisting condition exclusion prohibits only the refusal to cover treatment for a specific disease, not the exclusion of a family from coverage altogether, and applies only in the individual market, and so affects almost no one. More than half the states already have laws allowing parents to keep adult children on their policies—through ages varying from 24 to 31. And the other new benefits, too, may touch a small number of people (again, mostly in the individual market, where premiums will be rising all the while), but will do nothing to affect the overall picture of American health care financing. CBO scored these immediate reforms as having no effect on the number of uninsured or on national health expenditures.

The bill will also have the government send a $250 check to seniors who reach the "donut hole" gap in Medicare prescription drug coverage this year—and the checks will go out in September, just in time for the fall elections. But the checks will hardly make up for the significant cuts in Medicare Advantage plans that allow seniors to choose among private insurers for their coverage. Those cuts begin in 2011, but the millions of seniors who use the program will start learning about them this year—again, before the election—as insurance companies start notifying their beneficiaries of higher premiums or cancelled coverage.

We are also likely to see some major players in health insurance, including both large employers and large insurers, begin to take steps to prepare for the new system in

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ways that employees and beneficiaries will find disconcerting. Verizon, for instance, has already informed its employees that insurance premiums will need to rise in the coming years and retiree benefits may be cut. Caterpillar has said new taxes and rules will cost the company $100 million in just the next year, and tractor maker John Deere has said much the same. Such announcements are likely to be common this year, and many insurers active in the individual market are expected to begin curtailing their offerings as that market looks to grow increasingly unprofitable under new rules.

These early indications will help opponents of the new law make their case. But the case will certainly need to focus most heavily on what is to come in the years after this congressional election: spending, taxes, rising health care costs, cuts in Medicare that don't help save the program or reduce the deficit, and a growing government role in the management of the insurance sector.

The numbers are gargantuan and grim—even as laid out by the Congressional Budget Office, which has to accept as fact all of the legislation's dubious premises and promises. If the law remains in place, a new entitlement will begin in 2014 that will cost more than $2.4 trillion in its first 10 years, and will grow faster than either Medicare or private-sector health care spending has in the past decade.

Rather than reducing costs, Obamacare will increase national health expenditures by more than $200 billion, according to the Obama administration's own HHS actuary. Premiums in the individual market will increase by more than 10 percent very quickly, and middle-class families in the new exchanges (where large numbers of Americans who now receive coverage through their employers will find themselves dumped) will be forced to choose from a very limited menu of government-approved plans, the cheapest of which, CBO estimates, will cost more than $12,000. Some Americans—those earning up to four times the federal poverty level—will get subsidies to help with some of that cost, but these subsidies will grow more slowly than the premiums, and those above the threshold will not receive them at all. Many middle-class families will quickly find themselves spending a quarter of their net income on health insurance, according to a calculation by Scott Gottlieb of the American Enterprise Institute.

Through the rules governing the exchanges and other mechanisms (including individual and employer insurance mandates, strict regulation of plan benefit packages, rating rules, and the like), the federal government will begin micromanaging the insurance sector in an effort to extend coverage and control costs. But even CBO's assessment does not foresee a reduction in costs and therefore an easing of the fundamental source of our health care woes.

To help pay for the subsidies, and for a massive expansion of Medicaid, taxes will rise by about half a trillion dollars in the program's first 10 years—hitting employers and investors especially hard, but quickly being passed down to consumers and workers. And the law also cuts Medicare, especially by reducing physician and hospital payment rates, by another half a trillion dollars—cuts that will drastically undermine the program's operation as, according to the Medicare actuary, about 20 percent of doctors and other providers who participate in the program "could find it difficult to remain profitable and, absent legislative intervention, might end their participation." And all of this, CBO says, to increase the portion of Americans who have health insurance from just under 85 percent today to about 95 percent in 10 years.

Of course, this scenario—for all the dark prospects it lays out—assumes things will go more or less as planned. CBO is required to assume as much. But in a program so complex and enormous, which seeks to take control of a sixth of our economy but is profoundly incoherent even in its own terms, things will surely not always go as planned. The Medicare cuts so essential to funding the new entitlement, for instance, are unlikely to occur. Congress has shown itself thoroughly unwilling to impose such cuts in the past, and if it fails to follow through on them in this case, Obamacare will add hundreds of billions of additional dollars to the deficit. By the 2012 election, we will have certainly begun to see whether the program's proposed funding mechanism is a total sham, or is so unpopular as to make Obamacare toxic with seniors. Neither option bodes well for the program's future.

Some of the taxes envisioned in the plan, especially the so-called Cadillac tax on high-cost insurance, are also unlikely to materialize quite as proposed, adding further to the long-term costs of the program. And meanwhile, the bizarre incentive structures created by the law (resulting in part from the elimination of the public insurance plan which was to have been its focus) are likely to cause massive distortions in the insurance market that will further increase costs. The individual market will quickly collapse, since new regulations will put it at an immense disadvantage against the new exchanges. We are likely to see significant consolidation in the insurance sector, as smaller insurers go out of business and the larger ones become the equivalent of subsidized and highly regulated public utilities. And the fact that the exchanges will offer subsidies not available to workers with employer-based coverage will mean either that employers will be strongly inclined to stop offering insurance, or that Congress will be pressured to make subsidies available to employer-based coverage. In either case, the program's costs will quickly balloon.

Perhaps worst of all, the law not only shirks the obligation to be fiscally responsible, it will also make it much more

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difficult for future policymakers to do something about our entitlement and deficit crisis. Obamacare constructs a new entitlement that will grow more and more expensive even more quickly than Medicare itself. Even if the program were actually deficit neutral, which it surely won't be, that would just mean that it would keep us on the same budget trajectory we are on now—with something approaching trillion-dollar deficits in each of the next 10 years and a national debt of more than $20 trillion by 2020—but leave us with much less money and far fewer options for doing anything about it.

In other words, Obamacare is an unmitigated disaster—for our health care system, for our fiscal future, and for any notion of limited government. But it is a disaster that will not truly get underway for four years, and therefore a disaster we can avert.

This is the core of the case the program's opponents must make to voters this year and beyond. If opponents succeed in gaining a firmer foothold in Congress in the fall, they should work to begin dismantling and delaying the program where they can: denying funding to key provisions and pushing back implementation at every opportunity. But a true repeal will almost certainly require yet another election cycle, and another president.

The American public is clearly open to the kind of case Obamacare's opponents will need to make. But keeping voters focused on the problems with the program, and with the reckless growth of government beyond it, will require a concerted, informed, impassioned, and empirical case. This is the kind of case opponents of Obamacare have made over the past year, of course, and it persuaded much of the public—but the Democrats acted before the public could have its say at the polls. The case must therefore be sustained until that happens. The health care debate is far from over.

TOWARD REAL REFORM

Making and sustaining that case will also require a clear sense of what the alternatives to Obamacare might be—and how repeal could be followed by sensible incremental steps toward controlling health care costs and thereby increasing access and improving care.

Without a doubt, the Democrats' program is worse than doing nothing. But the choice should not be that program or nothing. The problems with our health care system are real, and conservatives must show the public how repealing Obamacare will open the way to a variety of options for more sensible reforms—reforms that will

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lower costs and help those with preexisting conditions or without affordable coverage options, but in ways that do not bankrupt the country, or undermine the quality of care or the freedom of patients and doctors to make choices for themselves.

Republicans this past year offered a variety of such approaches, which varied in their ambitions, costs, and forms. A group led by representatives Paul Ryan and Devin Nunes and senators Tom Coburn and Richard Burr proposed a broad measure that included reforms of Medicare, Medicaid, the employer-based coverage tax exclusion, and malpractice liability and would cover nearly all of the uninsured. The House Republican caucus backed a more modest first step to make high-risk pools available to those with preexisting conditions, enable insurance purchases across state lines, pursue tort reform, and encourage states to experiment with innovative insurance regulation. Former Bush administration official Jeffrey Anderson has offered an approach somewhere between the two, which pursues incremental reforms through a "small bill." Other conservatives have offered numerous other proposals, including ways of allowing small businesses to pool together for coverage, the expansion of Health Savings Accounts and consumer-driven health care (which Obamacare would thoroughly gut), and various reforms of our entitlement system.

All share a basic commitment to the proposition that our health care dilemmas should be addressed through a series of discrete, modest, incremental solutions to specific problems that concern the American public, and all agree that the underlying cause of these problems is the cost of health coverage and care, which would be best dealt with by using market forces to improve efficiency and bring down prices.

The approach to health care just adopted by President Obama and the Democratic Congress thoroughly fails to deal with efficiency and cost, and stands in the way of any meaningful effort to do so. It is built on a fundamental conceptual error, suffers from a profound incoherence of design, and would make a bad situation far worse. It cannot be improved by tinkering. It must be removed before our health care crisis can be addressed.

If we are going to meet the nation's foremost challenges—ballooning debt, exploding entitlements, out of control health care costs, and the task of keeping America strong and competitive—we must begin by making Obamacare history. We must repeal it, and then pursue real reform. ♦

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The Future of an Illusion

A piece of paper will not bring peace to the Middle East

By Elliott Abrams

Those who cannot remember the past are condemned, it seems, to direct the Middle East policy of the Obama administration.

Since the Oslo Accords of 1993, 17 years of efforts under three American presidents and six Israeli prime ministers have taught five clear lessons. Each of them is being ignored by President Obama, which is why his own particular "peace process" has so greatly harmed real efforts at peace. Today the only factor uniting Palestinian, Israeli, and Arab leaders is distrust of the quality, sagacity, and reliability of American leadership in the region.

The patching-up efforts of the last two weeks were impressive, but perversely: They showed how much damage had been done and how little the administration cares about reversing it. Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu, against whom Obama was said to be "boiling with rage" after the Jerusalem housing announcement, got the complete slate of Washington meetings: Clinton, Gates, Biden, Obama. But the meetings were virtually secret: The White House did not permit a single photo to be taken of the Oval Office session, an unprecedented snub. Same at State: no ceremony, no press conference.

For her part, Secretary Clinton told the giant AIPAC meeting, "Our credibility in this process depends in part on our willingness to praise both sides when they are courageous, and when we don't agree, to say so, and say so unequivocally." Several recent Palestinian actions, she said, were "provocations" that are "wrong and must be condemned." That was nice, but saying it to a Jewish audience in a kiss-and-make-up session in Washington fools no one, not after her famous 43-minute telephone call to Netanyahu. These "provocations . . . that must be condemned" (note the passive voice) did not after all elicit a timely call to Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas condemning them, nor did she use the Quartet meeting in Moscow on March 19 for that purpose. And general administration protestations that the United States is committed to Israel's security and that relations are "rock solid" now carry little persuasive power; they sound like Obama's (and for that matter Clinton's) campaign rhetoric, and everyone knows how useful a guide to administration policy all of that proved to be.

What are the lessons the Obama team is ignoring?

1 ISRAEL'S FLEXIBILITY IS DEPENDENT ON ITS SENSE OF SECURITY.

Martin Indyk, Bill Clinton's ambassador to Israel, put it this way in his memoirs: "The record . . . suggests that American presidents can be more successful when they put their arms around Israeli prime ministers and encourage them to move forward, rather than attempt to browbeat them into submission." During the George W. Bush years, the leader of the Israeli right, Ariel Sharon, decided to abandon the idea of a "Greater Israel," impose constraints on settlement construction in the West Bank (no new settlements, no outward expansion of settlement territory), and remove every settlement in Gaza and four small ones in the West Bank. His closest advisers say all of this was possible for him only in the context of unwavering American support for Israel's security steps—including the targeting and killing of Hamas terrorists and the refusal to deal with a terrorist leader like Arafat. What was the turning point for Sharon? Bush's June 24, 2002, speech, where he abandoned Arafat, denounced Palestinian terrorism, and said thorough reforms were the only possible basis for Palestinian statehood. Reassured, Sharon began to act.

Contrast this with the Obama administration, where Israel has been "condemned"—the toughest word in the diplomatic dictionary—for a housing project. Instead of seeking practical and politically feasible limits to settlement activity, the Obama approach has been to say every brick cemented to another was "illegitimate."

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Israelis know that these American denunciations of Israel liberate Europeans and others to crank up their own, and so it has been this past year: Israel has been increasingly isolated and criticized internationally. Once we used "condemn," it was impossible (even if we were trying, which we were not) to keep it out of Quartet and EU statements. Add a few other international assaults (the Goldstone Report on the Gaza war, for instance) and American acts of distancing (the president visits Cairo and Riyadh but skips Israel, for example), and Israelis are in no mood for additional risktaking. Who, after all, will have their back if things get rough? Hillary Clinton told AIPAC that "the status quo is unsustainable," as if just about anything we can get on paper would be better. Such phrases do not inspire Israeli confidence that their country's security is anywhere near the top of the administration's list. All this should be elementary, but it seems to have escaped the Obama White House.

Netanyahu speaking at the AIPAC conference, March 22

ASSOCIATED PRESS / TARA TODRAS-WHITEHILL

2 THE FAILURE TO SET STANDARDS FOR PALESTINIAN CONDUCT HURTS THE CAUSE OF PEACE.

In the Bill Clinton years, the foreign leader who visited the White House most often was Yasser Arafat—13 times. Who can blame Arafat for failing to take seriously criticism of his "alleged links" to terrorism when the invitations kept on coming? For years, American officials of both parties have said the "incitement must end," but they have imposed no penalty for its failure to end. When in March the Palestinian Authority (PA) named a square for a terrorist involved in an attack in 1978 that killed 38 Israelis, including 13 children, Obama, Biden, and Clinton were silent. Lower-ranking officials tut-tutted. In Palestinian society, the veneration of this terrorist, Dalal Mughrabi, is widespread; Fatah, not Hamas, is the one celebrating Mughrabi. PA radio and television incite hatred of Israel and Jews with regularity, as Palestinian Media Watch and MEMRI document every month.

In recent weeks the Obama administration has stated that both sides have responsibilities to meet, but it made no serious demands of the PA. Had there been early and regular insistence that incitement end, the Mughrabi incident would never have taken place. The price for such negligence is being paid in both Israeli and Palestinian society: Every such action and every vicious broadcast helps persuade Israelis that Palestinians do not truly seek peace and helps raise a new generation of Palestinians who see Jews as enemies to hate, not neighbors with whom to reach an accommodation. This infantilization of Palestinian society, moreover, moves it further from the responsibilities of statehood, for it holds harmless the most destructive elements of West Bank life and suggests that standards of decency are not necessarily part of progress toward "peace."

A tough demand that all the incitement end now—no more terrorist squares, a clean-up of Palestinian broadcasting, the replacement of offending school textbooks—would both help Palestinian moderates undertake these actions and reassure Israelis that President Obama shares at least some of their concerns about the ability of Palestinians to negotiate and sustain a peace deal. The silence thus far, the unconvincing and rote handling of this issue, leaves the impression that Obama simply wants a deal signed and doesn't much care about what happens after that. Like his distancing himself from Israel and his apparent lack of concern for Israeli security, this undermines any chance of successful peace talks.

3 ISRAELI WITHDRAWALS DO NOT LEAD TO PEACE UNLESS LAW AND ORDER CAN BE MAINTAINED BY RESPONSIBLE SECURITY FORCES.

Israelis learned this the hard way in South Lebanon and Gaza, and it is unquestionably the greatest factor leading them to oppose a similar withdrawal from the West Bank. The Labor party leader Ehud Barak is not viewed in Israel as a hardliner; when he was prime minister he offered Arafat a dramatic peace proposal in 2000. But when, as defense minister, he met with President Bush in 2008 he handed over, and raised repeatedly in later meetings with Secretary Rice, a list of Israel's security needs in the West Bank. He and Netanyahu (and the vast majority of Israelis) are of one mind on this: Terrorism from Gaza is a security chal-

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lenge for Israel, but terrorism from the West Bank threatens Israel's survival. There has been considerable progress in training Palestinian security forces, but no one believes they can yet maintain order without the presence of the IDF and Shin Bet. Those who say, as George Mitchell—Obama's special envoy to the Middle East—and the Quartet have, that there can be a peace deal in 24 months are saying that fundamental security issues can be finessed or forgotten. Of course they can if your goal is a piece of paper—or, perhaps better put, a paper peace. If you want a real and lasting peace, you must have the answer to the question: What will fill the vacuum when Israeli forces leave? Today the answer is chaos or Hamas, and any prediction that in 24 months these matters will be resolved shows a lack of seriousness. Palestinians who value law and order and seek to build a decent society, as well as Jordanians who worry what forces will be across the river from them, cannot be so cavalier. This brings us back to lesson one: If the United States is intent on a deal in 24 months no matter what, Israelis will understand that we are not going to protect their security and that we'll complain when they assert the need to do it themselves.

4 THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN DISPUTE IS NOT THE CENTER OF WORLD, ARAB, OR MUSLIM POLITICS.

George Mitchell once acknowledged that when he talks to Arab leaders they raise Iran first, but no one in the administration wants to allow mere facts to interfere with their ideology. George W. Bush was as close as any American president ever has been to Israel, but had excellent relations with the Moroccan, Algerian, Emirati, Omani, Bahraini, Kuwaiti, Saudi, and Jordanian rulers—all except the Egyptians, who were annoyed that he thought they should have free elections. Paying attention to what Arab political leaders say publicly about Israel is foolish, for their real views consist of tough-minded assessments of the balance of power in the region. What they want most of all is calm; they do not want their streets riled up by Israeli-Palestinian violence. Palestinians are not at the center of their hearts or they would visit the West Bank and bring plenty of cash with them. What preoccupies them is survival and Iran. If they take any lesson from the current coldness between the United States and Israel, it is that the United States is not a reliable ally. If we can ditch Israel, they know we can far more easily ditch them.

The most perverse misunderstanding along these lines is the thought that supporting Israel is risking American lives in Iraq and Afghanistan and in the war on terror. Vice President Biden is reported to have told Netanyahu that "this is starting to get dangerous for us. What you're doing here undermines the security of our troops who are fighting in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan." White House denials suggest that the quotation is not exact, but there has also been no flat-out denial of the sentiment. David Axelrod, the political hack who appears to be a key foreign policy strategist and spokesman for the president, was asked on one of the Sunday shows if he agreed that settlement construction puts U.S. troops' lives at risk. He replied, "It is important for our own security that we move forward and resolve this very difficult issue." Not exactly a resounding "no." General David Petraeus, the CENTCOM commander, told the Senate that "clearly the tensions in these issues have an enormous effect on the strategic context in which we operate in the Central Command area of responsibility." Once again, not a "No way" or a "Get real." Petraeus had a chance to say the Pakistanis are not thinking hard about West Bank settlement construction when they watch the Taliban and developments in Waziristan, and he failed to do so then or in later explanations. How hard would it have been for him or some other official to remind everyone that Osama bin Laden became a terrorist to overthrow the government in Riyadh, not the one in Jerusalem? The struggles between modernizers and traditionalists, Sunni and Shia, secularists and Islamists are tearing the Islamic and the Arab world apart. They would continue to do so if Israel no longer existed.

Israelis listening to official American remarks hear an amateurish interpretation of Arab politics, which as Lee Smith reminded us in his recent book (quoting bin Laden himself) is basically about backing the strong horse. Arab leaders want to know what we will do to stop Iran; they want to know if their ally in Washington is going to be the top power in the region. Israelis wonder where the "uh oh, this will make Islamic extremists angry" argument stops. Does anyone think al Qaeda or the Taliban would be mollified by a settlement freeze? The Islamists are not interested in "1967 issues" related to Israel's size, but in "1948 issues" related to Israel's existence. If henceforth we mean to engage such people rather than to defeat them, Israel's existence—not its settlement policy—comes into play.

If this is not the Obama view of the world, the administration should say so quickly and very clearly. Otherwise his administration can fairly be said to be revisiting our own "1948 issues." The argument that Israel would be a great burden and ruin our place in the Arab world was proffered then by George Marshall—and rejected by Harry Truman. In his memoirs, Clark Clifford wrote at length about the State Department's efforts to stop Truman from recognizing the new State of Israel. Clifford quoted Marshall's deputy Robert Lovett as saying on May 14, 1948—the day Israel declared its independence and Truman offered recognition—"There will be a tremendous reaction in the Arab

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Ramat Shlomo, the Jerusalem neighborhood at the center of the confrontation between the Israeli government and the Obama administration

world. We might lose the effects of many years of hard work with the Arabs. We will lose our position with Arab leaders. It will put our diplomatic missions and consular representatives in personal jeopardy." After 60 years of American leadership and military dominance in the Middle East, it should be as disturbing to Americans—not least to Democrats who venerate Truman—as it is to Israelis that traces of this approach are emerging again in Washington.

Netanyahu answered these poor arguments in his address to AIPAC:

> Our soldiers and your soldiers fight against fanatic enemies that loathe our common values. In the eyes of these fanatics, we are you and you are us. To them, the only difference is that you are big and we are small, you are the Great Satan and we are the Little Satan.

5 THE 'PEACE PROCESS' RETARDS PEACE.

A single-minded concentration on "the peace process" hurts the cause of peace and moderation throughout the region and does little to build the necessary institutions of Palestinian society. It's obvious that nearly two decades of negotiations have not produced peace. Instead this focus has had two deleterious effects.

First, it means we care more about getting Syria, Egypt, or others to endorse some negotiating plan than we do about their own internal situations. The people, the politics, the alliances of such countries become unimportant, as we focus on whether their rulers will deign to sit at some table we've laid. Human rights and democracy issues evaporate.

Second, we use all our chips for the negotiating sessions, instead of applying them to the hard work of nation building. We ask Arab states to reach out to Israel (which they will not do) when we should be demanding that they reach out to the Palestinians (which they might). We explode, and damage U.S.-Israeli relations, over a tiny construction announcement because it might slow "proximity talks" Mitchell has cooked up. We use American influence with Israel not to promote economic growth in the West Bank, but to try and impede Jewish (never Arab) construction in Israel's capital city. This set of priorities is perverse and will not lead to peace. Instead, a pragmatic approach that seeks to create in the West Bank a decent society and a state that will maintain law and order should be our goals.

The last week of March brought talk of "reconciliation" between the Obama administration and the government of Israel. Relations are so strained that we, too, appear to need our own set of "proximity talks" now. But reconciliation is not a simple matter, as the Catholic Church knows. In that faith, it is a sacrament consisting of three elements: conversion, confession, and celebration. Conversion is the internal realization of wrongdoing, confession is the external admission of it, and celebration follows when (and only when) the sinner has converted, repented, confessed, and returned. Given the Obama administration's view of Israel and the Middle East, celebration seems a long way off. ♦

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The Pain in Spain

As its economy goes down the drain

By Christopher Caldwell

Madrid

A survey taken a few weeks ago found that 60 percent of young people in Spain want to work for the government. You wouldn't think this was possible. A decade and a half ago, the country's conservative prime minister, José María Aznar, began to deregulate the system he inherited from the socialist Felipe González and tightened the country's budget to allow it to join the new European currency. The Spanish economy took off like a rocket, achieving rates of growth that were almost Chinese. Aside from Ireland, no place in the Western world could match it. Unemployment, which had been as high as 25 percent, quickly fell into the mid-single digits. The country's debt fell just as fast. Aznar does not deserve all the credit. It was González who negotiated the tens of billions of dollars in "structural funds" from the European Union, which were invested wisely in highways, bridges, electrical grids, and high-speed trains. Spain gave the impression of a country that was not just dynamic but competently managed, no matter what party was in power. Such countries tend to produce young people whose ambitions go a bit further than whiling the days away behind a counter in the *ayuntamiento*.

But there is something rotten at the heart of the Spanish economy, and has been for quite a while. In the spectacular national elections of 2004, bombs placed by al Qaeda-linked terrorists killed hundreds of Spaniards in and around Atocha station in Madrid, and brought the socialist José Luís Rodríguez Zapatero to power. Zapatero had called for Spain to withdraw from its participation in the U.S.-led Iraq war, and the bombers claimed they had set their bombs in Iraqis' name. So Zapatero became an accidental prime minister. He pulled out of Iraq immediately, to the delight of the Spanish electorate, which had opposed the war by majorities topping 90 percent. He passed a bunch of social reforms no one had been clamoring for: gay marriage and more liberal laws on abortion and divorce. And rather as Gordon Brown did in Britain, he recklessly allowed the state to grow faster than the economy. But aside from that, he left Aznar's free market economy pretty much alone. The economy was almost a distraction for Zapatero. It was not the kind of politics he cared about, and when things began to go desperately wrong for Spain in the fall of 2008, he refused to use the word "crisis," preferring to describe what was happening as a "deceleration."

But signs of trouble were proliferating. During Zapatero's campaign for reelection in early 2008, his economics minister, Pedro Solbes, debated Manuel Pizarro, the economics guru for the main opposition party, now led by Mariano Rajoy. Pizarro warned of certain statistics that showed Spain drifting into crisis. What new factor, he asked Solbes, had led Spain's current account balance to rise from 4 percent in 2001 to 10 percent in 2007? Why had the price of clothes, and the price of fruit, risen three times as fast in Spain as it had in the rest of Europe? Pizarro raised these questions in the curt, cold manner of the businessman that he was. Solbes was more easygoing and professorial. The big point he wanted to introduce was: Crisis? What crisis? The inflation was due to fluctuations in the price of oil, he explained, and Pizarro's worries were exaggerated. Solbes disparaged the conservative plan for allowing people to invest their own retirement funds as "the Pinochet model." In the phone-in poll after the debate, the consensus was that Solbes had blown Pizarro away, and this was the verdict of Spanish voters, who gave the Socialists and Zapatero another term. It sure does not look that way if you watch the debate now.

Spain is by some measures the country most dangerous to the Western economic system. Unemployment has doubled (to 19 percent) in the past 18 months. Spain is one of the so-called PIIGS (Portugal, Italy, Ireland, Greece, Spain), the European countries running an elevated risk of falling out of the common currency or into sovereign default. Spain is not as bad off as Greece, which was given a credit lifeline at a European Community summit in Brussels last week. But, since Spain's economy is about four times as large, making up 9 percent of the Eurozone, most of the stopgap solutions that fixed the Greek economy cannot be applied to it. Its problems are like those of the two other countries where a housing bubble fed into a financial crisis that threatened to take down the entire

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economy. One of them, Ireland, appeared to be in desperate straits a year ago, but has since mustered the will to shrink its government 8 percent. It has slashed benefits, and cut public employee salaries by 14 percent. As a result, despite going through a period of austerity, it is on track to bring its economy back into balance. Spain's problems, alas, run deeper. They go back decades. A combination of partisan animosity and unreasonably high expectations of government may make it impossible for the country to right its fiscal ship. In this, Spain has less in common with Ireland than with the second of the two real-estate-boom countries, the United States.

HOUSING, BANKS, AND GOVERNMENT

When GDP in Spain was growing by 6 percent a year, the construction industry was growing by 30 percent a year. At the height of the boom in 2007, construction made up 13 percent of GDP and about 10 percent of employment. As a result, there are now around a million homes in Spain with no one to live in them. There are entire subdivisions in the deserts outside Madrid—including one notorious boondoggle in the town of Seseña with 13,000 housing units—that are standing empty because financing ran out before the infrastructure was quite complete.

Since Spain's native population was shrinking as all this housing was being built, it might seem obvious now that what was going on was a bubble. But it was less obvious at the time. Several factors were driving the housing boom. First, the market for second homes among Northern Europeans took off. Second, 4.5 million immigrants arrived, mostly from North Africa and Latin America, in the decade after 1999, many of them to work in construction. (In a funny way, they were brought over to build houses for themselves.) They quickly transformed Spain from a zero-immigration country into one in which more than a tenth of residents were foreign-born. Finally, divorce boomed, particularly after the passage of Zapatero's reforms in the middle of the decade, and this caused the demand for housing to increase by mitosis. Prosperity accelerated the trend. Whereas a young man in his twenties during the dictatorship of Francisco Franco would live in his parents' house until he married, a "modern" young man in a rich democracy wants—and feels he deserves—a place of his own.

Spain's problems go back decades. A combination of partisan animosity and unreasonably high expectations of government may make it impossible for the country to right its fiscal ship.

It is in the financing for all this construction that the Spanish crisis differs from the American. Under the circumstances of Spain's entry into the common European currency, its lending market could not help but overheat. Spain's interest rates were around 15 percent in the years leading up to its euro membership—and then overnight interest rates fell to levels that were suited to the sluggish economies of Germany and France. These eventually fell into the low single digits, and Spain had negative real interest rates for the whole half-decade after 2002. The banks were paying their customers to borrow money.

That being the case, Spain behaved relatively responsibly. It had neither subprime loans, nor a mortgage market heated to the boiling point by Fannie Mae, nor offshore "special investment vehicles" that permitted banks to take a lot of their mortgage exposure off their books. In fact, it had one of the toughest and most responsible systems in the world for making sure that banks' loan portfolios were adequately capitalized. Under a system of "dynamic provisioning" introduced in 2000, Spanish banks had to keep reserves of roughly 10 percent of the value of every housing loan they made. That seemed onerous when the default rate of mortgages was 1 percent, as it was 18 months ago, but now that about 7 percent of mortgages are defaulting, it provides a nice cushion.

Unfortunately, it may not be cushion enough. Spain had another problem: the entanglement of its political system with its banking system. This is not just a story of modern interlocking directorates. A system of "*cajas*" accounts for more than half of Spain's financial system. There are now about 45 *cajas*, and they are often compared to savings-and-loans or credit unions, but they are better described as semi-public, semi-private foundations. *Cajas* date to the 19th century, but there is a tradition of church-based lending organizations that goes back even before that. *Cajas* pay no dividends but use about 30 percent of their earnings for projects that serve the common good. It is a very noble-sounding enterprise, and that is partly why Spaniards put their money in *cajas*. They might work as advertised if a church were in charge of them, but Spain's constitution of 1978 gave the regional governments a voice in how the *cajas* were run, which, in effect, made them the policy instrument of whatever political party was in power.

Mostly the *cajas* were managed responsibly, but, given their link to political parties, they had to keep in mind

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that loan applicants were often voters, too. What is more, the idea of what constituted the common good broadened. *Cajas* had traditionally shared their wealth with social programs, health providers, and art institutions. But, for instance, when a plan to build a Warner Brothers theme park outside Madrid—very much desired by the region's politicians—did not find funding, the Madrid *caja* took 25 percent of the shares in it. That investment worked. Others didn't. The government of Castilla/La Mancha—the same one that approved the empty housing in Seseña—prevailed upon the local *caja* to build an airport in Ciudad Real that nobody needed. The *caja* went bankrupt. It is the only one to have done so thus far, but another dozen are on the verge. The *caja* system controls such a huge amount of Spain's financial activity that they are unlikely to fail systemically, but they are going to need to be consolidated, and the government reckons that this will cost $120 billion. Moody's threatened to lower Spain's sovereign credit ratings if *caja* mergers don't push ahead.

One reason local savings banks affect the nation's credit is that the *cajas* lend to government, too. The distribution of political power and budgeting authority in Spain is so complex that Spanish political scientists have a hard time understanding it. In simple terms, much budget authority is in the hands of local *ayuntamientos* (town halls) and *autonomias* (regions, which have a lot of the prerogatives of states in the early American republic). So about 20 percent of the national debt is not even under the government's control. The autonomous communities (Catalonia, the Basque Country, Madrid, etc.) will probably be able to make the billions in cuts they need to bring their deficits back down to 3 percent before 2013, as the European Union has urged. But the *ayuntamientos*, since they are financed mostly by building permits and property taxes, are under water. Very much as in Ireland, when the building boom stops, governments stop with it. One *ayuntamiento*, Ochandurí, in Rioja, has debt of $13,000 for every man, woman, and child in the town.

MORE SPANISH THAN OTHERS

This conflict between central and regional government is what shapes Spanish politics now, and Spanish politics makes budget balance hard to sustain. Zapatero has built his electoral coalition on the loyalties of the autonomous communities, particularly Catalonia, Andalusia, and the Basque country, where distrust of the overarching Spanish state is strong—as is nationalism. He infuriated the conservative Popular party when he described the Spanish state as "a concept that is open for discussion." The conservatives, in turn, are apt to blame Spain's present deficits on the alleged waste, fraud, and abuse of autonomous communities and the other minority interests that Zapatero woos. Gays, feminists, Basques, and atheists are no less Spanish than their fellow citizens, conservatives say. But they are not more Spanish either.

It is hard to translate the politics of the autonomous communities into American terms. In some places, such as Andalusia, it resembles U.S. minority politics. State handouts account for a significant proportion of the region's income—about 25 percent, according to some estimates. Zapatero, who faces critical regional elections there next year, can keep his forces together provided he can offer enough state money. On a trip to Andalusia in mid-March, he did just that.

In Catalonia, however, where his Socialists have scraped together a coalition with nationalist parties of the left, the politics is more like the U.S. politics of states' rights. A substantial proportion of the Catalans, who make up one-fifth of the population but account for about a third of the country's economic activity, want more autonomy. They feel the left-wing nationalists who made a coalition with Zapatero have done a poor job of securing it. Catalans have an allergy to the Spanish conservatives that dates from the Civil War of the 1930s and will not vote for them in the next election. They appear likely to restore to power Convergència i Unió, the relatively free-market party of the nationalist right, which is the region's natural majority.

THE POLITICS OF LABOR REFORM

The toughest nut to crack for Zapatero will be reforming the Spanish labor market, which went wrong in the Franco era (1939-75) and has proved impossible to fix. It will be tough to crack because he doesn't want to crack it. Spain's labor market has much to do with the present dangers to Spain's economy, and no attempt to get Spain out of its fiscal hole will be convincing without a reform of it.

Franco's corporatist model offered low-wage jobs for life. Spanish workers were keen on the "for life" part of this bargain, less so on the "low wage" part. During the transition to democracy, unions were legalized and added to the mix. While the level of unionization in Spain has never been high, unions are seen as the custodians of the will of the free working class. Any victory by the country's General Workers' Union quickly gets translated into policy across the entire labor market.

The benefits and protections would be thought generous even by French or German standards. Unemployment compensation lasts up to two years. It initially pays 70 percent of final salary, which falls over time, but only to about 60 percent, and in the present climate of high

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joblessness, there is great pressure to extend these benefits. If a worker has a permanent contract, you cannot fire him without cause, unless you are willing to pay 45 days' worth of salary for every year worked. If you claim to have cause, you need to go to court to prove it—a drawn-out, expensive, and probably futile process during which you still have to pay the worker his salary. The unions consider these arrangements *derechos adquiridos* (acquired rights), almost a kind of property. Any suggestion that they are negotiable is considered an insult. "It used to be machines were fixed, capital and labor was variable," one former government economist (a Socialist) told me. "But now it has changed. A machine you can throw out, a worker you're stuck with."

Since this level of worker benefits was hobbling the economy even in the 1980s, a new kind of temporary contract was introduced. The attempt to institute it resulted in a general strike. Spain's unions called general strikes in 1988, 1992, 1994, and 2004 when labor reforms were proposed, and in each case they threatened to make the country ungovernable.

The idea of temporary contracts was that workers could be hired and fired at will, but after three years of good performance they had to be offered full-time, permanent contracts. What resulted, as anyone but a politician could have predicted, was a strange dual labor market that leaves Spain with both the most pampered and the most exploited workers in Europe. The arrangement has a crippling effect on productivity. Older workers are inefficient because they are too secure. Younger workers, who tend to be much better credentialed than the older ones, can work hard for peanuts and then be put out on the street after two years and 364 days. Career-wise, they tend to spin their wheels for three or six years at just the time of life when people are willing to take risks, move, start companies. Unsurprisingly, no company wants permanent workers. What they want is people who will take low-wage jobs. In practice, the dual labor market has been a recruiting call for immigrants, and it has encouraged the sort of low-tech work that immigrants do—roofing, dishwashing, landscaping—instead of investment in productivity. During the boom, 85 percent of contracts were temporary, and no more than a tenth were ever converted to permanent contracts. Now the rate of conversion is even lower.

Getting out of this mess will take some political courage. Any serious labor reform will probably, in the short term, drive the unemployment rate upward from the 19 percent where it stands now. Zapatero is an instinctual leftist with a Manichean view of the Spanish Civil War. As such, he fears nothing more than a general strike. General strikes are things that only happen to fascist dictators and other enemies of the working class. It has surely not been lost on Zapatero that Greece has had three of them since it started trying to put its financial house in order this winter. In February, after Zapatero suggested in remarks at the World Economic Forum in Davos that he would favor raising Spain's retirement age from 65 to 67, the unions went into the streets, and a general strike was the implicit threat.

OVER THE FALLS

This makes the probability that the government will tackle Spain's labor arrangements—at the heart of the problem—very low. It means that piecemeal measures are the order of the day. The government has introduced a Value-Added Tax that conservatives have promised to oppose, it has scrapped its plan to modernize the army, it has announced that it will phase out the mortgage-interest deduction starting next year. It has passed something called the Law on the Sustainable Economy, which will incentivize high-tech start-ups over real estate start-ups, as if a million empty housing units were not incentive enough.

Like many Western governments—like the United States, in fact—Spain has a clear path to recovery provided the economy grows at utterly implausible rates. The secretary of state for the economy now gives presentations to investors in London and Paris professing that Spain is "determined to act" to reduce its deficit. But this is very much like American noises on the deficit: lots of declarations of will and idealism and very little concrete description of how to get there. Olli Rehn, the monetary commissioner of the European Union, has described the Spanish promise to cut the deficit to 3 percent of GDP in 2013 as wishful thinking. Standard & Poor's lowered its rating of the Bank of Spain's debt from Group 2 to Group 3 (which includes the United States).

The Spanish debt crisis can be looked at in a lot of different ways. You can see the housing bubble, the labor market, the division of governmental labor between Madrid and the autonomous communities, or the lack of political will as the main cause. There are so many budget-cutting measures you may *possibly* have to take that a good case can be made for shutting down almost any aspect of the welfare state. The whole kit and kaboodle may be nearing the point of unsustainability. The system of state guarantees and welfare rights that Spain has erected may be the biggest bubble of them all. In that case, the wisest course for a politician may be to stay in the boat, hope you are wrong that you are going over the falls, and wait and see what you *really* have to do to survive. ♦

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'The Execution of Lady Jane Grey' (1834)

HIP / ART RESOURCE

The Art of History

A reassessment of Paul Delaroche

BY HENRIK BERING

London

In 1973, a huge, rolled-up canvas was found in the cellars of the Tate Gallery. Measuring 97 by 117 inches, it turned out to be *The Execution of Lady Jane Grey* by the French painter Paul Delaroche, a work which had been believed lost when the museum was flooded in the 1920s. The painting shows the 16-year-old blindfolded Lady Jane kneeling in front of a scaffold, clad in radiant white and groping for the chopping block, supported by Sir John Brydges, the Lieutenant of Tower. On her right, the executioner waits impassively with his axe, while two ladies in waiting lament on the other side.

As a lark, the curators of the National Gallery decided to put it on show in 1975 as an example of the bad taste of the Paris Salon; modern museumgoers were expected to disapprove heartily of historical narrative painting. Just to make sure, the accompanying catalogue noted that Delaroche "is regarded, when the 20th century thinks of him at all, as something of a charlatan who merits his present obscurity."

But of course, expert opinion and popular taste have a way of disagreeing, and much to the curators' surprise—and disgust, no doubt—*Lady Jane Grey* quickly turned into one of the museum's most popular paintings. The floor in front of it had to be constantly repolished. And now, decades later, a new set of curators has made a reassessment and arranged a full-dress exhibition of Delaroche at the same National Gallery, reestablishing him as an important contemporary of Ingres, Delacroix, and Gericault.

At the height of his popularity in the 1830s, Paul Delaroche was Europe's highest-paid painter, and the most reproduced in prints. Done in the high finish typical of the Paris Salon, the great themes running through his

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works are martyrdom and usurpation: Gone is the heroic optimism of David and the Revolutionary Age. Delaroche concentrates on victims. As one critic has put it, he has a knack of choosing subjects "that attack the nervous system of the public."

In a great clash of martyrdoms, when *Lady Jane Grey* was first exhibited in the Salon in 1834, she blew Ingres's ambitious *Martyrdom of Saint Symphorian* off the wall. Where Ingres's painting was vague and diffuse, leaving the viewer confused as to what was going on, Delaroche left no such doubts: The poor girl's head was about to roll, and nothing could be done about it. For years afterwards, Ingres suffered nightmares of spectators crowding around Delaroche's work and ignoring his own masterpiece. But why would a Frenchman paint such a thoroughly English subject? After the defeat of Waterloo, there was a great interest in English history in France, and in the works of Walter Scott, Shakespeare, and Byron. So prior to *Jane Grey* Delaroche had done *The Princes in the Tower*, with Edward V and the Duke of York clinging to each other, while their little dog senses the approach of doom. He had also done a harrowing *Last Moments of Queen Elizabeth.*

The Civil War attracted his special attention. In British Victorian art one finds a glorification of Oliver Cromwell and his Roundheads as protectors of the constitution, reflecting a contemporary reading of history. But a competing strain celebrates the Lost Cause of Charles I and the Cavaliers, reaching its apotheosis in William Frederick Yeames's *And When Did You Last See Your Father*, where crafty Puritan interrogators try to make an innocent child reveal the whereabouts of his parent. The French, however, had their own take on the conflict: They saw it as a forerunner of the French Revolution, offering the chance to perform what Sir Roy Strong has called "a historical autopsy on the Revolution." Thus, Charles was seen as a prototype of Louis XVI, and Cromwell of Napoleon.

Delaroche did three great Civil War paintings: *Cromwell Before the Coffin of Charles I*, with the Lord Protector—"brutal as fact," in the words of the poet Heinrich Heine—standing over the body of his defeated enemy. This was followed by *Charles Insulted by Cromwell's Soldiers*, where coarse guards blow smoke in the king's face and spill wine over him; and *Strafford on his Way to Execution*, with Charles's councilor Thomas Wentworth being led away, and Archbishop Laud blessing him from his cell window. Though Delaroche would deny any specific connection, it is impossible not to interpret these works as indirect comments on recent French history.

'Oliver Cromwell at the Coffin of Charles I' (1831)

BPK / HAMBURGER KUNSTHALLE / ELKE WALFORD

Delaroche achieved his effects by employing elements of the stage, making the viewer a witness to the crimes. For several of his paintings he built little stage sets, complete with plaster model figures that could be manipulated into desired positions. In visits to Britain he also went to some lengths to get the historical details; for dramatic effect, however, he allowed himself certain liberties. The execution of Lady Jane, for instance, is transposed to a cramped, claustrophobic indoor setting rather than the outdoor courtyard of the Tower of London where it actually took place. To this he added an element of sacred imagery, particularly strong in *Charles Insulted by Cromwell's Soldiers*, with Charles in the role of Christ. (This painting, incidentally, was also believed to be lost when Bridgewater House was bombed in World War II.)

One quality of narrative paintings of the 19th century is that they make excellent conversation pieces—and, thus, educational tools. And rather than being judged by a cumulative effect, each painting should be assessed individually. If one of the definitions of a successful painting is that, once you have seen it you will not forget it, then *Lady Jane* is a successful painting. And the message Delaroche imparts—pity for the suffering individual, detestation of mob rule—are not bad lessons to pass on to the young. That the real Lady Jane Grey was not the meek, vulnerable, defenseless creature seen here, but made of considerably sterner stuff, is another matter. Similarly, Charles I was not exactly Christ, but a weak, debauched, and stubborn monarch who refused to compromise and plunged his country into civil war. One thing is certain: The thin, blood-red ring around his neck in *Cromwell Before the Coffin of Charles I*—where the king's head has been sewn back on the corpse—will forever fascinate schoolchildren with its ghoulishness. ♦

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B&A

Actor at Work

The relentless productivity of Clint Eastwood.

BY SONNY BUNCH

Bee Vang, Clint Eastwood in 'Gran Torino'

ANTHONY MICHAEL RIVETTI

It's a cliché to refer to any particularly prolific filmmaker as "the hardest working man in show business," but when taking Clint Eastwood's epic career into consideration, it's hard to think of a more fitting moniker. That's not necessarily a good thing; being prolific and being great aren't always the same.

Since donning The Man with No Name's poncho in Sergio Leone's *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964), Eastwood has starred in or directed (or starred in *and* directed) 54 films, and post-production work has already begun on his 55th feature, *Hereafter*. That's better than one a year for almost half a century—and not the half of the century during which the studio system held directors and actors under contract and required them to churn out art as if it were an industrial product. Eastwood *likes* working this way.

Aim for the Heart
The Films of Clint Eastwood
by Howard Hughes
Tauris, 304 pp., $29

Aim for the Heart faithfully recounts the plot of 51 of those pictures (touched on but not studied in depth are his latest: *Changeling*, *Gran Torino*, and *Invictus*), as well as the reaction they received from critics and audiences. Additionally, Hughes fills readers in on Eastwood's early exploits on television's *Rawhide* and creature features such as *Tarantula*. It's an exhaustive work, fine as a reference resource for someone who needs a little more information than the Internet Movie Database can provide, but not terribly useful if you're looking for deep criticism or unique insights into each individual work.

Divided into seven parts, *Aim* arranges Eastwood's oeuvre not chronologically but by genre: Westerns, cop films, love stories, comedies, dramas, thrillers, and war movies. Needless to say, the most interesting portions have to do with the grizzled westerns and the hair-trigger cops that turned Eastwood into a worldwide sensation. That shouldn't be too surprising; *The Bridges of Madison County* isn't what your average Eastwood fans are interested in. They're interested in hard-charging, self-assured, windswept, sunburnt, laconic loners with squinting eyes and a quick-witted quip resting on lips fixed in a knowing smirk. They're interested in someone who can pull a gun at a moment's notice but knows the boundary between right and wrong, even as he inches toward that line. They're interested in a man whose name is either unknown or "Dirty Harry" Callahan.

But those characters comprise just a portion of Eastwood's body of work. Viewers interested in finding a "through line"—a consistent message or thematic core that runs in all of his features—for his career have their work cut out for them. Trying to square Eastwood's career with the auteur theory is a tough chore for any writer. Of course, that hasn't stopped critics from trying. In his recent video essay, "Kingdom of the Blind," Matt Zoller Seitz argues that Eastwood's career can be defined by characters driven by a desire for revenge who wrestle with the internal tensions that desire produces.

> Many Eastwood movies have a self-critical aspect, a sense that Eastwood (as actor, director, or both) is examining dark impulses within himself (and humankind) and finding them troubling, pathetic, repulsive. It's the sentiment of a moral, humane, internally consistent filmmakers. Eastwood is all three—when Eastwood the icon isn't undercutting Eastwood the artist.

This claim would have more power if Seitz hadn't started and ended his video essay with clips from *High Plains Drifter*: In addition to directing, Eastwood plays a literal spirit of vengeance. The Drifter is a reincarnated marshal who, before the movie begins, was brutally whipped to death by three gunhands while the townsfolk sat idly by and watched. Disgusted by their cowardice, the Drifter claims his vengeance not only on his three murderers but on the town as well, robbing it blind before burning it down.

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His spirit cannot rest until he has had his revenge. Vengeance isn't just a means to an end here, it's an end unto itself.

The same can be said for *Unforgiven*. Many have argued that this film serves as a deconstruction of Eastwood's typical western persona, but that's nonsense. *Unforgiven* ends like every other entry in the genre, with a wronged man standing alone against his enemies and gunning down evildoers in the name of revenge. Any regret or remorse that Eastwood's Bill Munny may have shown previously is overshadowed by his righteous violence welcomed and cheered by audiences seeking both resolution and punishment of the guilty.

Readers looking for a through line might be better off going with something that Hughes writes about Eastwood's directorial debut, *Play Misty for Me*. Mostly forgotten now, *Misty*'s themes aren't particularly relevant. What does matter is this little factoid: "Budgeted at $950,000, the film was completed by Eastwood for $900,000 and four days under its five-week shooting schedule." In Hollywood, this is what Eastwood is best known for: He doesn't just work at a maniacal pace, he works at a maniacal pace and completes filming quickly and cheaply. Studios love him because he comes in under budget and on time, and actors love him because he doesn't demand dozens of takes on simple line readings, or keep them lounging around waiting for the perfect lighting.

Of course, one can't help but wonder if this incredible efficiency hasn't hindered his work: Instead of laboring over a film in an effort to perfect it—to squeeze every last drop out of his cast and locations—he shoots, finishes, and moves on to his next project. Yes, he's won a pair of Oscars, but could anyone make the argument that either *Unforgiven* or *Million Dollar Baby* is one of the best films of its decade? When the American Film Institute revised its list of the 100 greatest American films three years ago, only *Unforgiven* made the cut.

So, yes: Clint Eastwood is the hardest-working man in show business, as Howard Hughes ably demonstrates. It's important to remember, however, that efficiency and excellence aren't typically the same thing. ♦

B&A

Byron the Romantic

He really was 'mad, bad, and dangerous to know.'

BY JOHN SIMON

The Irish novelist and story writer Edna O'Brien is to be congratulated: *Byron in Love* compresses Lord Byron's 36 event-crowded years into 200-plus loosely packed octavo pages, hardly more than a generous novella. Terse but untruncated, it stands out in an age where a movie star or sports figure's life easily commands 600 or more pages. Leslie A. Marchand's authoritative *Byron: A Biography* (1957) is in three sturdy volumes; his condensation, *Byron: A Portrait* (1970), still runs to 338 more capacious pages than Edna O'Brien's. Let us hope that this short but daring book will not be deemed too much for the mere author of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, *Don Juan*, and some exquisite lyrics, as well as some of the finest letters written in the English language.

Byron in Love
A Short Daring Life
by Edna O'Brien
Norton, 240 pp., $24.95

But of course, George Gordon Byron is more frequently remembered as one of the great, often scandalous, seducers in English history, incestuous lover of his half-sister Augusta, and sacrificer of his life fighting for Greek independence from the Turks. A Romantic poet, he was anything but romantic in his treatment of most women, whether mistresses, casual pickups, or a wife. Bisexual, he was rather better to some male lovers, or would-be lovers.

The title is something of an understatement. Though concentrating on Byron's sex life—more often in lust than in love—*Byron in Love* succinctly covers all the major and many minor nonamatory aspects of the life. Only the work gets very short shrift. Byron bequeathed to the English language the adjective "Byronic," which O'Brien defines as excess, diabolical deeds, and a rebelliousness answering to no one. He gave Casanova a fairly close run having (unlike the Italian) a beauty irresistible to almost all women and not a few men. One look at him and women fell in love, not to mention over backward. He, in turn, went for all kinds, aristocrats or servants, intellectuals or ninnies, older or much younger, more often than not married, and of assorted nationalities. Also some handsome youths.

He did have one disadvantage: a deformed right foot and scrawny lower calf. These he kept fanatically concealed by every conceivable means, from special boots to walking on tiptoe. Vain and competitive as he was, the defects may have stirred him on to dedicated sexual depredations. Most characteristic of Byron, in love or out, was his dual nature. He was prone to sudden uncontrollable rages and verbal, or even physical, abuse. But he could also be charming, amusing, and seductive as he oscillated between being a good companion and destructive monster.

His dark side has been variously attributed to a wretched childhood—a mad absentee father and an unattractive, unintelligent, unloving mother—or to a violent heritage on both parents' sides, and even to begetting, at a very early age, bastards on two servants. Also to falling in boyish love with some young cousins and being humiliatingly rejected by the most mature, Mary Ann Chaworth. Likewise blamed have been the bad foot that Byron called the mark of Cain and, more inclusively but vaguely, an innate bad temper.

John Simon is the author, most recently, of John Simon on Music: Criticism 1979-2005 *(Applause Books).*

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To me, Lord Byron seems a typical case of bipolarity—a drinker, brawler, miser, arrogant show-off, but also a wit, sometimes amazingly generous, astute observer, and delightful traveling companion good at picking up languages. Becoming a lord at age 10 encouraged superciliousness and, eventually, constant money troubles. There was reckless spending on clothes, ostentatious arms (loaded pistols and sword even at his bedside), numerous horses and a menagerie of sundry animals and birds regularly traveling with him along with inordinate baggage, and gifts to sundry friends and husbands of wives he seduced.

He did have very close friends: the Irish poet Tom Moore; Cambridge chums like John Cam Hobhouse, the future Lord Broughton and favorite traveling companion; his banker, Douglas Kinnaird; fellow toper and wit Scrope Davies; a true admirer, the Earl of Clare, and a few others. Unusually for an author, he maintained a lifelong correspondence with his publisher, John Murray—mostly very warm, except when Murray tried to censor him, sometimes successfully.

As O'Brien shows, Byron needed to be in love, but needed the chase after new love even more. Rarely did he stay with a woman for long. I would postulate four categories, lowest of them one-night (or one-hour) stands. Thus, upon arrival on foreign soil in Ostend, in what turned out to be his final exile, he fell upon a chambermaid in his hotel "like a thunderbolt." Next up were the flings, as exemplified by the 16-year-old prostitute Caroline Cameron, whom the very young Byron dubbed Dahlia, paraded before his friends on the Brighton waterfront in boy's clothing, and for a week or so considered marrying. A much later fling is typified by the Drury Lane actress Susan Boyce, with whose "sylphlike figure" he shamed wife and visiting sister, threatening to move her to the conjugal apartment. (She was to be dismissed from Drury Lane for the syphilis she contracted from Byron. Puzzlingly, we don't hear of other women being similarly infected.)

Higher up the scale were the affairs. These could last as long as several months, as with Caroline Lamb, who famously dubbed him "mad, bad and dangerous to know," which describes her just as well. Being the daughter in law of his esteemed confidante, Lady Melbourne, this bisexual tomboy, his "little volcano," was particularly appealing to him. She often dressed in the livery of her pages, her boyish good looks topped by bobbed pale gold hair, her voice bewitching even in its intermittent lisp. She collapsed in hysteria at her wedding to "a flagellist" who, she claimed, "schooled her in the most unusual sexual deviations and sabotaged the few virtues she had possessed."

'Lord Byron Shaking the Dust of England from His Shoes' (1904) by Max Beerbohm

MICHAEL NICHOLSON / CORBIS

She was ready to elope with Byron, but her very eagerness began to pall on him. This included stunts such as climbing in heavy masculine garb the back stairs to Byron's digs, with elaborate strategies needed to get her out of there. A letter to Caro from Byron contains the sentence (overlooked by O'Brien), "I never knew a woman with greater or more pleasing talents, *general* as in a woman they should be, something of everything, and too much of nothing." But there was too much persistence, and Byron escaped to 38-year-old Lady Oxford, his "Armida," who may have been the most beautiful of his women. But he developed an unhealthy passion for her 11-year-old daughter, Lady Charlotte, which the mother promptly scotched.

After seven or eight idyllic months, a seeming pregnancy (the lady already had five children by various lovers) and her husband's debts precipitated the Oxfords' departure for the Continent—and Byron's involvement with one of his two inamoratas (the highest category), his five-years-older half-sister, Augusta. They had had very little contact before; but now, escaping the gambling and horse-betting debts of her husband, Colonel George Leigh, she sought out brother Byron. Despite her three children, she paid daily visits to his book-and-saber-lined rooms, "where women were rarely admitted." As O'Brien writes:

> Augusta . . . chatty, pliant and silly with her large grey eyes and her baby talk . . . seems to understand him as no woman previously had. It's crinkum and crankum and laughter, pulling him out of his grumps, and the lame foot that he had so determinedly hidden from others, not hidden from her and christened by them "the little foot." And so it is Gus and Goose and Baby Byron and foolery and giggles.

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They thought of eloping, possibly to Sicily. When Augusta wanted to bring one of her daughters along, Byron, who detested children, refused and pointed out that a child could be made wherever they ended up. But joint travel plans faltered, and Byron resumed a warm correspondence with Lady Melbourne's niece, Annabella Milbanke, his future wife. Meanwhile, to escape Augusta, he visited an old Cambridge friend, Sir Wedderburn Webster, recently married to young, pretty, aristocratic Lady Frances. While the husband fatuously displayed an ostentatious uxoriousness, Byron slowly undermined the wife's naïve piety—but, at the moment of her surrender, spared her in "a burst of chivalry he [came] to regret."

Back with Augusta, he spent a rapturously incestuous month at Newstead Abbey, his huge, ramshackle property, where her being wife and sister to him gave him four of "the happiest [weeks] of his life." A daughter, Medora, would be born. Nevertheless, the epistolary courtship of Annabella proceeded, and after remarkably dilatory wooing and even near-fainting upon receipt of her letter of acceptance, the wedding (during which he thought about Mary Anne Chaworth) finally took place.

The carriage journey to the wedding-night destination was the first chapter of the horror story that is their 13-months' marriage. In what he was to call the "treacle moon," he sang boisterously in the coach, told his bride he would prove to her he was the devil, boasted of crimes her "catechizing could not redeem," and threatened vengeance for her having refused him two years earlier. He did not help her out of the carriage, and ravished her on the sofa before dinner.

By morning, Annabella had experienced the "deadliest chill" upon her heart, and despite some better moments, the marriage proved a disaster. As Peter Quennell put it, Annabella was "a blue-stocking debutante . . . a high-minded, slightly pretentious, maybe rather frigid girl." With her pride as heiress (though much less lucratively so than Byron had hoped) came that of mathematician, philosopher, and versifier—all undesirable to Lord Byron.

When, during Augusta's two-month stay with the young couple, Annabella in her lonely bed heard through the walls brother and sister having reckless fun, she began to suspect the truth.

Lady Caroline Lamb

HULTON ARCHIVE / GETTY IMAGES

While Annabella was giving birth to daughter Ada, Byron went off to the theater and expressed the hope that mother and daughter would both die. Two days after the *accouchement* he locked himself into the bedroom with Annabella and, with utmost brutality (as she was later to tell in a sworn statement to her lawyer), he sodomized her. Scandal, which Byron's indiscretions helped precipitate, forced him to flee England—definitively, as it turned out.

His adventures as an amorist continued in Italy. He greatly enjoyed it when two fetching women, his landlord's wife and a baker's tempestuous spouse, fought assiduously over him. Finally, though, he settled into a steady nexus with the teenaged, very beautiful (although short-legged!) Countess Teresa Guiccioli, married to the 40-years-older Count Alessandro, who sometimes impeded and at others times facilitated the relationship. Of this four-year intimacy with a spunky inamorata Iris Origo has written a splendid book, *The Last Attachment* (1949). But Byron's truly last attachment, albeit strictly one-sided, was for 15-year-old Loukas, a soldier in his private army in Greece.

The Italian years involved him in anti-Austrian revolutionary activities with Teresa's liberal and persecuted family, the Gambas. There was also a pertinacious ex-mistress, Claire Clairmont, whom Byron cruelly banned from seeing their daughter Allegra. Allegra, in turn, was placed in a convent by Byron where, not yet six, she died, causing him serious (but transitory) grief.

For Byron, being a hugely successful poet, adored by countless women, was not enough. He craved heroic action, which he undertook by joining the Greek fight for liberation from the Turks. He knew that he wouldn't emerge alive. He also knew that he wouldn't die heroically in battle, but in the throes of a painful illness in the swamplands of Missolonghi, with a handful of doctors unable to agree on a diagnosis.

Fascinatingly recurrent throughout *Byron in Love* are instances of women giving to (or getting from) Byron some hair as a souvenir. Usually it was a single lock, although from one minor paramour he got three feet of it. At his death, Byron had a curl of Augusta's chestnut hair in a carefully preserved packet he had labeled "La Chevelure of the one I most loved." But around his neck, according to Iris Origo, he wore in death a locket containing Teresa's hair, swapped for one containing his.

Was there ever a more ironic, or Byronic, ending? ♦

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B&A

Wealth of a Nation

How the Keynesians went off the road at the Laffer Curve. **BY EMILY ESFAHANI SMITH**

The only history of supply-side economics written by a professional historian to date, this entertaining account should be required reading not only for staffers on Capitol Hill and the economic do-gooders in the White House, but also for anyone interested in "the most significant development in American—arguably world—economic history" in recent times. Brian Domitrovic tells the story of how a few renegades patched together the supply-side revolution.

Econoclasts
The Rebels Who Sparked the Supply-Side Revolution and Restored American Prosperity
by Brian Domitrovic
ISI, 368 pp., $27.95

The scene is Michael 1, a restaurant just footfalls away from the American Stock Exchange in New York. Michael 1 was the stomping ground for B-team Wall Street financiers, but beginning in 1974, a new group joined what Domitrovic calls the junior varsity of Wall Street: economists Robert Mundell, Arthur Laffer, and Charles Parker, the political operative Jeffrey Bell, and journalists Robert Bartley and Jude Wanniski. All were frustrated iconoclasts, hostile to the economic establishment, and intent on reversing the economic decline of the 1970s.

A first-rate storyteller as well as historian, Domitrovic skillfully unfolds the events that ignited the supply-side revolution and breathes life into the colorful characters behind the scenes. We learn, for example, that the 42-year-old Mundell, founding father of the revolution, wore his hair below his shoulders in 1974 and spoke "in a low slur, glided over syllables, sprinkled in wry remarks, and had a Canadian accent to boot"—forcing his dining interlocutors to lean in to their table to hear what he had to say. Then in 1999, with his hair cut, a triumphant Mundell shed his mumbling speech when he started bellowing Frank Sinatra's "My Way" during his address accepting the Nobel Prize for economics.

Jude Wanniski showed up for his first reporting gig "in a Buick Riviera convertible and lamé outfit, with a leggy Vegas showgirl (his wife) riding shotgun" and did as much as anyone to spread the gospel. It was Wanniski who presided over a famous encounter between Dick Cheney, deputy to Gerald Ford's chief of staff Donald Rumsfeld, and Arthur Laffer, at which meeting the Laffer curve was born. Laffer was making the case for cutting tax rates, and Cheney was worried that such cuts would diminish government revenues. Laffer argued that cutting rates could actually bring in more revenues, and to elucidate the point, grabbed a napkin and pen and drew a graph showing the relationship between tax rates and revenue. It looked like a "McDonald's arch lying on its side," Robert Bartley would later testify, but Cheney was unconvinced. Right then, the Laffer Curve would have been relegated to the ash heap of economic history had Wanniski not made it the focal point of a bestselling book four years later, *The Way the World Works*.

As for Bartley, the reticent Midwestern editorial page editor of the *Wall Street Journal*, he was ever skeptical of the Establishment and once wrote that the heroes of the 1980s economic boom were "college dropouts, breakaway engineers, and illegal immigrants." It's not clear where the supply-siders fit into that scheme; but in 1974, and still doubtful, he began attending the Michael 1 dinners, where he pressed and challenged the aloof Mundell on a number of points. Mundell gave rambling answers, quoting poets and speaking allusively, but Wanniski stepped in as translator, and eventually Bartley came around, penning a 1977 *Journal* editorial, "Keynes Is Dead."

To "demand-side" economists, Keynes's acolytes, spending was the solution to the woes of an economy. In power, they printed money to spur spending, and the price of food and oil skyrocketed, unemployment hit 8 percent, and growth degenerated to levels not seen since the Depression. To make matters worse, Washington routinely boosted taxes, which, combined with inflation, produced the ignoble phenomenon known as "bracket creep."

To supply-siders, the solution was simplicity itself: Enact the exact opposite policy mix. Stabilize the dollar and cut tax rates. Loosen fiscal policy, and strong monetary policy would create jobs and capital. Jobs and capital would spur economic growth. When Laffer and company took these ideas public, they were considered radical. And even today, criticism of supply-side economics can be remarkably juvenile: Paul Krugman characterizes it as an African virus, DailyKos says it was the "Greatest Lie Ever Told," and *Slate* calls it "the classic Republican phony theory."

But while the nattering nabobs chatter away, history tells another story. Ronald Reagan's landslide victory over Jimmy Carter elevated supply-siders to the levers of power, and Reagan instituted a 30 percent cut in the marginal income tax rates, echoing the 1977 Kemp-Roth legislative proposal. In 1981 the Reagan tax cuts were enacted, supply-side economics became law, and "the seven fat years" followed. Between 1982 and 2007 the United States experienced the greatest period of stable economic growth in its history.

Which leaves one question: If the supply-side theory discredited Keynesianism and brought prosperity, can it do the same in the present dismal economic climate? ♦

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B&A

In Vlad We Trust

'You're at the Transylvania station at a quarter to four . . .' **BY SARA LODGE**

Sighisoara

Brasov, Romania

Transylvania has, for centuries, conjured images of wildness and danger.

Bram Stoker, the Irish theater manager and author of *Dracula* (1897), never visited. But fellow Victorians did. Andrew Archibald Paton in 1861 described a region of spectacular beauty, haunted by violence. A rich but inflammable ethnic brew of Saxon German, Hungarian, Romanian, and gypsy communities exploded during the 1848 revolution. The peasantry, long oppressed under the Austro-Hungarian empire, turned on the landowners. As Emily Gerard recounted in the 1880s,

> They pillaged the country houses, setting everything on fire, and put the nobles to death with many torturing devices, crucifying some and burying others up to the neck, cutting off tongues and plucking out eyes, as a diabolical fancy suggested.

Gerard recorded a host of ancient superstitions whose influence remained current, with stories of werewolves and vampires. Paton, who described his passage through burned-out villages and pits of human bodies, worried that the "savage peasant" like a tiger having "once tasted human flesh . . . will not be satiated." Small wonder that later Victorians, steaming into Transylvania by train, thrilled to the thought that their necks were unsafe.

In *Dracula*, the lawyer Jonathan Harker travels by rail for three days from London to the "imaginative whirlpool" of Transylvania. Now the trip takes only two days. But despite Romania's admission to the European Union in 2007, the destination remains mysterious. I decided to follow in Harker's footsteps. I, too, would sleep nervously amongst strangers. I, too, would stay with a count. And I, too, unexpectedly, would encounter a creature of the night that caused me to flee in terror.

I boarded the Eurostar at London's newly revamped Victorian station, St. Pancras, for the first stage of my journey: to Brussels. In Brussels you change for Cologne and take the night train to Vienna. This, for me, was where the adventure began: I'd never slept on a train before. I'd certainly never slept in a compartment with five complete strangers, in bunks one above the other like sticks of chewing gum in a packet.

"It's all right, we're Germans," a woman muttered darkly. "It's the Romanians you have to watch out for." I slept surprisingly well with my laptop under my pillow, soothed by the rocking motion of the train as it dashed by lake and mountain, delivering me into Vienna with the morning post. I spent the day in the National Gallery before boarding the night train to Transylvania.

My spine tingled with apprehension. I studied my five male companions as we prepared to fold up the seats to construct our bunks. As far as I could tell, their teeth were normal. They smiled warily. "It's all right, we're Romanians," they muttered. "It's the gypsies you have to watch out for." Clearly the region's ethnic tensions, though buried, are still very much alive.

My friendly fellow passengers fed me apricots and explained that Vlad the Impaler was really an unfairly maligned and misunderstood national leader. He defended Transylvania from the incursions of the Turks. And he inculcated a policy of national honesty by compensating anyone who had been robbed, overpaying the reimbursement, and then seeing if they reported the overpayment. If they did, they were rewarded; if they didn't, they were impaled. He left golden jugs by drinking fountains: Everyone knew that if they stole one they would meet an excruciating end.

"So he was really the inventor of Zero Tolerance," I suggested.

"That's right," they nodded, "very effective man. Besides," they added hotly, "everyone impaled people in those days."

"Stakeholder politics," I agreed doubtfully.

Where Jonathan Harker endured a nightmare coach ride into the

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Carpathian Mountains, I was met, by prior arrangement, by a genial employee of the count, who drove me from Brasov to the village of Miklósvar. Count Kálnoky has renovated a number of 19th-century houses there, where he rents rooms. The count does have a passion for bats. But he also has a passion for birds and leads guests on guided walks around his Renaissance castle where you can spot nesting storks and golden orioles.

Tibor Kálnoky is a trained veterinarian who spent the Communist years in America but returned in the late 1990s to renovate Miklósvar, largely through encouraging tourism. His scheme appears to be working. The farmhouse where I stayed was delightful: My attic room had exposed beams, bright homemade bedcovers, and antique furniture worn by long use to a patina like the coat of a well-tended horse. There was a string of garlic round the door, but the only thing likely to startle me from sleep was a rooster.

From my window, I watched horse-driven wagons passing, loaded to toppling point with sweet-smelling hay. In Transylvania, you can still experience elements of rural life as it was in the 19th century. Fields are stippled red, blue, orange, and white by the hundreds of wildflowers that thrive where there are no crop sprayers. The fresh sheep's cheese, made by local shepherds, tastes of herbs and grasses. You can wander in pristine forest until the cows come home—which in summer is at 8 P.M. Families gather to see them sway back in tranquil file, each cow turning off of her own accord into her own barn.

At Miklósvar, all the guests dine by candlelight in the wine cellar at one long table. Waitresses bring clear soup with dumplings, pork, and potatoes with vegetables, then perhaps a cake made with local cherries and honey. There is robust but flavorful Romanian wine. And you can discover what brings other people to Transylvania. I encountered committed Goths, with 26-point black eyeliner, channelling the vampire vibe. But I also met enthusiasts of Saxon building techniques, hikers, train-spotters, and self-confessed carpetbaggers.

"We're following the rug route," they announced, "from here to Istanbul." Transylvania's complex cultural heritage is literally woven into its fabrics: Churches here boast priceless prayer rugs influenced by Ottoman and medieval Christian design. The continuation of local arts and crafts in wood and needlework, with the unspoiled countryside of aspen, beech, and oak, attracts many who enjoy organic food and support traditional skills: Prince Charles owns two properties in the neighborhood.

He might, however, hesitate to spend the evening at The Shed, Miklósvar's principal nightspot. The Shed is—well, a shed: The kind of outhouse in which you would store your lawnmower. But it contains a bar that sells plum vodka so cheap that for $10 you can get the whole village drunk. There is also impromptu folk dancing with burly men who wrangle livestock for a living. The smell in The Shed at 11 P.M. on a Saturday is many times scarier than Christopher Lee. I liked the place enormously.

If you tire of rural pleasures, you can visit Sighisoara, a UNESCO world heritage site. The design of Sighisoara, like the road signs in Romanian, Hungarian, and German you pass on the way, reflects the region's conflict-ridden history. The Saxon town, on a rocky massif, once presented a beautiful battery of 14 towers (nine remain), each historically maintained by a different guild: the tailors' tower, the tinsmiths' tower, and so on. Whenever Sighisoara was attacked, the men would throw down their tools and swarm up their tower to defend it.

Now the streets are invaded by tourists, in search of ghoulish ghoulash and rose-flavored ice-cream. But the ancient buildings retain their mystique. Above a formidable gateway rises the 14th-century clock tower where, at midnight, one of seven Baroque figures revolves into view—Diana, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, Saturn, and the Sun—representing in pagan symbology the days of the week. Below the clock is a torture chamber; victims must have been able to measure their last hours by the chimes.

Memories of violence and concealment are never far away here. Locals told a joke about a nearby "bicycle factory" during the Cold War. A man who had worked there for two decades was teased by his friends: "Laszlo," they said, "why don't you own a bicycle? Surely after all this time you could have stolen the materials."

"It's puzzling," he admitted, "but however often I try, when I assemble the parts at home, all I get is a gun."

I learned more about the Communist years from Gazdag Levente who, as a teenager, was informed on and arrested for listening to rock 'n' roll and spent a night in the cells. Now he runs the Black Stork guesthouse in Aita Mare and, if you ask nicely, will take you to look for bears. Wolves, lynx, and bears still haunt the forests of Transylvania. Of the three, bears are most numerous.

"We'll go to the river at dusk," he said. "They come to drink." Eager to spot a bear, I nonetheless felt rather nervous when I met him as arranged and found he was armed only with a pair of binoculars—and a garden hoe.

"Are you sure about this?" I asked.

"Of course," he rejoined, "follow me." I was jumpy as a cricket as we shuffled through the long grass, crossed the river on stepping stones, and climbed a hill to the fringe of a wood. We sat on a tarpaulin, gazing at the riverbank through binoculars. Nothing. Sounds of shepherds partying in their hut on the high pasture. Nothing. Beautiful shooting stars. Nothing. And then, right behind us, a loud and terrifying noise, something between a growl and a bellow: "Run!" said Gazdag.

Reader, I ran. I still don't know whether we were running from a bear, a boar, or a banshee. But thankfully, we reached the Land Rover before it did.

Transylvania is a beautiful but fragile alloy of cultures. It needs tourism to energize its economy, but insensitive investment could turn it into Trashylvania. Everywhere I traveled I saw new construction work, much of it cheap and ugly. Only by preserving what is best about local tradition, from agriculture to craftsmanship, and safeguarding the natural environment, will it retain the wild charm that first lured Victorian visitors. I left determined to return, like Jonathan Harker, in the snow.

The "imaginative whirlpool" had claimed another soul. ♦

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B&A

An Inside Story

The French version of lives within prison.

BY JOHN PODHORETZ

For my money, the prison movie is the most mystifying of genres. I don't understand why people continue to make prison movies, and I don't understand why people who aren't paid to do so go to see them. For two hours, we viewers find ourselves, like the characters themselves, trapped with a bunch of bad guys and crazies in a confined space of surpassing ugliness. The more powerful the movie, the more unpleasant the sensation of confinement it induces.

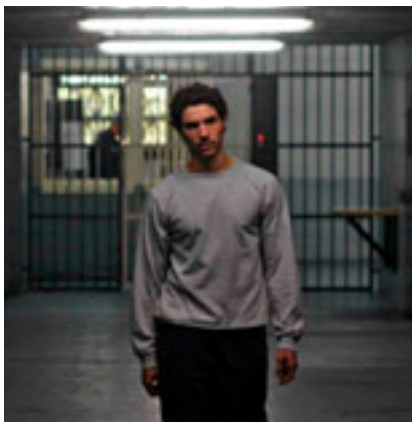
If the story centers on someone unjustly jailed, as many prison movies do, the experience of watching that person navigate through the horrors of life in lockup can be extremely upsetting. And if the story is about someone who is in jail for good reason, the movie only works if it makes you root for him, which makes you emotionally complicit in his crimes, and is therefore upsetting in another way.

That is exactly what happens in the celebrated new French film *A Prophet*, which won every award in France last year and was favored to win the Oscar last month for best foreign film (in the end, some Argentine movie nobody ever heard of took the statue). We're never told why the 19-year-old Malik is in prison outside Paris, but over the course of the movie's 150 minutes, we learn he spent most of his youth in juvenile detention, which suggests he has not been up to good before we first see him.

Early on in the film, Malik is blackmailed by the leader of a Corsican prison gang into murdering a fellow Muslim. A desperate Malik, who is sullen but soft and lonely, tries to get out of it any way he can, but he can't. He commits the murder, in horrifyingly bloody fashion, even after the fellow Muslim shows him some kindness and offers him good advice.

It turns out that the murder is the best thing that ever happened to Malik. He follows the good advice—to learn to read and start planning for his life out of prison—and becomes a confidant of the gang's leader. The sullen boy we first encountered turns out to be something of a genius, with a Machiavellian cast of mind and the ability to learn obscure languages (Corsu, the Italian argot spoken on Corsica) simply by being in proximity to them.

A Prophet
Directed by Jacques Audiard



Tahar Rahim

Cowriter/director Jacques Audiard makes us take Malik's personal growth and his unexpected social brilliance on faith. We see that everyone trusts Malik, though nobody should; everyone likes Malik, though he gives them no reason to; everyone is impressed by him, though he's so recessive it's hard to see why. Eventually, Malik receives permission to travel outside the prison for job training 12 hours at a time, and uses those 12 hours to run increasingly hazardous and complex errands for the Corsican boss and his own growing network of drug dealers and gangsters.

It would be churlish to say that what happens in the course of *A Prophet* is implausible, since most movies are implausible; but a movie about an imprisoned felon who seems to move about almost at will in the course of its final 90 minutes stretches even implausibility to the breaking point. And yet the fact that *A Prophet* escapes from its prison setting helps make it the riveting, even exhilarating, picture it is.

It turns out that *A Prophet* is not a prison picture at all; rather, it's a story about the education of a master criminal. In this respect, if in no other, it evokes *The Shawshank Redemption*, which is probably the most popular behind-bars movie ever made. *Shawshank* pulls a clever trick on its audience through a marvelous third-act twist that reveals what you have been watching isn't really a prison picture after all but a heist movie, a more somber and less comic but no less exciting con than the one in *The Sting*. And it's structured so that, after it establishes the prison setting, the characters are allowed to leave the grounds to do all sorts of things in the world beyond its walls.

A Prophet is wholly involving and very much worth seeing, but it has a whole lot less on its mind than it first appears to have. Malik's Muslim heritage suggests the movie will explore some of the themes of Christopher Caldwell's *Reflections on the Revolution in Europe*, but it turns out to be a red herring of a kind. That is true as well of the movie's peculiar spiritual aspect, in which Malik is visited by ghosts and has a precognitive vision that helps explain *A Prophet*'s otherwise elusive title. The spiritual stuff allows Audiard to pull off some neat shots; but they don't enrich the movie, they just give it an illusory depth.

It's hard to say what this movie is about, and that may be because it's really about nothing. And that is true as well of most prison movies, which are, in the final analysis, just grueling studies in claustrophobia. ♦

John Podhoretz, editor of Commentary, *is* THE WEEKLY STANDARD*'s movie critic.*

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"More than 100 House Democrats met behind closed doors Wednesday afternoon with representatives of the FBI and the U.S. Capitol Police. The lawmakers voiced what one senior aide who was present described as 'serious concern' about their security in Washington and in their home districts when they return this weekend for the spring recess."

—Washington Post, *March 25, 2010*

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More Democrats Feel Threatened, Annoyed

NEW LAW TO BAN MEAN STARES, TEA PARTIES

BY PHILIP RUCKER

Ever since President Barack Obama signed health care reform into law, Representative Charles Rangel (D-N.Y.) says his life has been a living hell. "Everywhere I go, whether it be to my numerous apartments in the city or on a chartered jet to the Caribbean, I see these people giving me mean stares," says the former chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee. "I don't like it one bit. It's like they all have it in for me and want to see me behind bars—because of how I voted on health care."

Representative Jim Moran (D-Va.) recalls how he too was recently harassed while sitting at the counter of a local Arlington diner. "This guy sitting next to me taps my arm asking me to pass the sugar for his oatmeal," says Moran. "'First off,' I told him, 'don't you ever f— touch me. Second, get your own sugar. You're the loser who ordered oatmeal in the first place.'" Moran says the man then asked him a second time, which got the congressman thinking this was more than about sugar. "'It's about my health care vote, isn't it?' I asked him. He gave this mock look of confusion, and that's how I knew I was being harassed.'" Moran notified authorities of the incident but not before smashing the bowl of oatmeal over the man's head and throwing him over the counter.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE

Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi directs her newly anointed Royal Guards to set up a defilade in the Hall of States.

Representative Henry Waxman (D-Calif.) also reports feeling more threatened since the passage of health care reform. "It was early evening as I was driving on Wilshire Boulevard headed towards the freeway when some guy in a sportscar decides to cut me off. Now normally this would never happen in my district. Also, the car was definitely not a hybrid. And I think he was smoking tobacco in his car, which ought to be illegal." In other words, Waxman concluded, "he had it in for me because of health care reform."

With reported incidents now numbering in the hundreds, Democrats have proposed a new law to ban dirty looks, mean stares, grunts, and other vocalizations of displeasure. A separate bill is also being drawn up to ban the source of these threats: tea party gatherings. According to Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, "For the sake of our security, tea parties need to be banned. Unless, of course, it happens to be a tea party of the radical center, as endorsed by the esteemed New York Times columnist Thomas L.

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Biden To GOP: 'Boo F—ing Hoo'

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